

IMPROVING THE RESPONSE OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP  
IN ADDRESSING THE PASTORAL CARE NEEDS  
OF VICTIMIZED AND ABUSED WOMEN

Betty Miller Green

Bachelor of Arts, Chicago State University, 1977  
Master of Education, Loyola University, 1982  
Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology, Argosy University, 2000  
Master of Divinity, Chicago Theological Seminary, 2001

Mentor

Thomas L. Francis, DMin

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **IMPROVING THE RESPONSE OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN ADDRESSING THE PASTORAL CARE NEEDS OF VICTIMIZED AND ABUSED WOMEN**

By  
Betty Miller Green  
United Theological Seminary, 2015

Mentor  
Thomas L. Francis, DMin

This action research project focuses on improving the response of church leadership in addressing the needs of women who have been victimized or abused. These circumstances, compromise, inhibit and affect women psychologically, physically and spiritually. Women are therefore unable to fully hear and receive the gospel message of love and acceptance. The foundation for this project is a pastoral care model of leadership. Church leaders are considered “first responders” when pastoral care is needed in the wake of crises. This is a social justice issue, which leads to the oppression of women and keeps them on the margins of society.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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To my clergy colleagues in Districts 2 and 3 and the regional staff of the Ohio Region, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), thank you for your participation in the focus groups. Special thanks to the women in the Ohio Region who participated in the project. Although individually you will remain anonymous, for confidentiality, your voices were heard!

A big thank you to my professional advisors, Dr. Irvin W. Green and Drs. Charisse and Donald Gillett; this work could not have been done without your support and guidance. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. To my peers, friends, family and all who have listened to my stories, helped to read, proof and edit my papers, encouraged me, pushed me to keep going and walked with me on this journey, my humble appreciation. Thank you all for believing in me.

**TO GOD BE ALL THE GLORY.**

## **DEDICATION**

To my husband, Irvin, who walked beside me every step. Thank you for being there and believing in me.

To my son, Jason, whose depth of perception never stops amazing me!

To my “daughter in love,” Nikki, who is one of the most courageous and determined women I know.

To my grandson, Jawann, who said to me at the beginning of this journey to “always do the best you can.”

To my granddaughter, Nye, may your love and quest to learn never cease.

To my Godson, Antwan, keep striving to be the best you can be.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ABC	American Baptist Church
CCT	Christian Church Together
CWBM	Christian Woman's Board of Mission
DOC	Disciples of Christ
GMP	General Minister and President
IMN	Interim Ministry Network
NBA	National Benevolent Association
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UCC	United Church of Christ
U.S.	United States
WCTU	Women's Christian Temperance Union

## INTRODUCTION

As we recall the story of Tamar found in Second Samuel, we can begin to grasp the reality of the vulnerability that women face against male domination. A woman does not have to do anything to be subjected to abuse. Just being a woman makes her a target. Just being born female carries a lifetime sentence of subjected abuse. According to a report done by the United Nations, “close to one in ten (girls) have been raped or sexually assaulted by the time they turn twenty.”<sup>1</sup> One in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

This is a significant problem in that most women are personally acquainted with victimization, abuse, or sexual violence, or know someone who is acquainted with these forms of violence. Women have made significant contributions to society and the church throughout history, yet their needs and concerns continue to be routinely dismissed or taken for granted. If women are able to work together, their collective strength gives support to their survival. One of the biblical examples of this can be found in the book of Ruth. Ruth and Naomi found themselves without husbands, sons, or other males to

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<sup>1</sup> MSN, “One in 10 Girls Sexually Abused Worldwide: UN,” accessed September 5, 2014, <http://news.msn.com/world/one-in-10-girls-sexually-abused-worldwide-un>.

<sup>2</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “Domestic Violence Fact Sheet,” accessed May 2, 2014, and September 9, 2014, [http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet\(National\).pdf](http://www.ncadv.org/files/DomesticViolenceFactSheet(National).pdf).



protect them from the evils of society. Even in this day, there is some degree of validity of this for many women.

The role of the male being the rescuer or protector of women is a reality. It is important to note that this comes with privilege, authority and dominion that make it “acceptable” to mistreat and abuse women. This kind of attitude endorses and somehow justifies the mindset that does not “raise the red flag” when a woman is violated.

The conditioning for this mindset begins during the formative years of childhood. It is part of the culture. If no one tells you that it is wrong it is likely to be accepted as normal and not questioned. To step forward and call out this violation and sin against women takes courage. Advocating for women has been met with much resistance from men and women. Yes, women! This may be somewhat surprising, but too many women experience and even participate in the victimization with backbiting, gossiping and taunting of one another.

The definition of rape and sexual assault have changed and evolved over time. Sexual assault is “illegal sexual contact that usually involves force on a person without consent or is inflicted upon a person who is incapable of giving consent.”<sup>3</sup> The definition of rape, no matter what it is, can only begin to describe the agony of the violation against women. S. Amelia Stinson-Wesley describes the after reactions as “Rape Trauma Syndrome,” which she notes is similar to post traumatic stress disorder; she also notes, “rape is both a dirty and disgusting subject and should not be sugar coated. Sexual assault

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<sup>3</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “sexual assault,” accessed September 13, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexual%20assault>.

is a crime and should not be treated lightly simply because of the intimate nature of the violence.”<sup>4</sup>

A woman must find her own way to survive, or she will be consumed by this traumatic event in her life. Unfortunately, the trauma continues as others minimize or ignore the plea for help from the victim. Women feel the sting of disbelieving pastors who do not believe that there are victims of such trauma and abuse in their church. Too many sermons have been preached that minimize or ignore the traumatic events of abuse.

There is a disconnection between some people in the pews who have been abused and some pastors in the pulpit. That disconnection is a breach that must be closed. Those who have been abused are desperate to find something or someone to give them hope. Ironically, even those whom God has put in positions of leadership in the church often fail to bring that anchor of hope women so desperately need. Where humans fall short, it is faith and God’s word that can be the anchor of hope. The words are found in the book of Isaiah:

The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in the parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.<sup>5</sup>

This scripture provides assurance that you will be sustained. These words may provide some comfort as the trauma of the abuse begins to sink in. The rush of emotion combined

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<sup>4</sup> S. Amelia Stinson-Wesley, “Daughters of Tamar: Pastoral Care for Survivors of Rape,” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 223.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 58:11, New Revised Standard Version. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture will be taken from the NRSV.

with the physical pain and reality may be too much to endure. Denial, fear and even anger may overwhelm as victims attempt to make sense of and regain some control over their lives. At the very least, the most immediate need is for medical attention and safety to be provided for the victim, especially in the case of battery or rape. This needs to be paramount for every church leader to provide.

In the words of Shirley Caesar in her song “Peace, in the Midst of the Storm”:

When the world that I've been  
Living in collapses at my feet  
And when my life is all tattered and torn  
Though I'm wind-swept, I've been battered  
I'm gonna cling unto His cross  
I'll find peace in the midst of the storm  
(Is that alright?)

There is peace in the midst of the storm-tossed life  
There is an Anchor, there is a rock to build my faith upon  
Jesus Christ is my vessel so I fear no alarm  
He gives me peace in the midst of the storm.<sup>6</sup>

FaithTrust Institute is a religious organization founded in the 1970's by Rev. Marie Fortune to address the needs of women who face sexual and domestic violence in the church. The original focus of the institute was to address sexual violence. In 1979, domestic violence was added. The institute reports, “Over the past thirty-five years, our work has shown us that abuse touches all of us regardless of our race, class, age, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. FaithTrust Institute has become a catalyst within

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<sup>6</sup> Shirley Caesar, “Peace in the Midst of the Storm Lyrics,” accessed May 20, 2015, <http://songlyrics.com/shirley-caesar/peace-in-the-midst-of-the-storm-lyrics/>.

religious communities teaching, urging, challenging and supporting leadership to address sexual and domestic violence, two of the most persistent social ills of our time.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Stinson-Wesley, “The transformation from victim to survivor is a long process. It usually takes years. We must realize that recovery and healing are not the same for each woman. Recovery is not moving beyond the experience but rather integrating it into one’s life.”<sup>8</sup> There are many serious spiritual issues that each victim often faces as she begins to face the realities of what happened. In their trauma they may question and distrust others and even their faith in God: “Survivors also have a number of very difficult questions such as: Why me? Was it my fault? Was God testing me? Was God punishing me? Was God strengthening me? Why did God let this happen to me? Does God still love me? Can God forgive me for this (evidence of self-blame on the part of the survivor)? Why is there suffering? Where was God?”<sup>9</sup> There may be some changes in routine and how they interact with others. Her reactions may not be clearly understood by others, especially if they are not aware of the incident.

Because women fill the pews every Sunday in significant numbers and they are the backbone of the church, their needs should not be ignored. As church leaders go about the business of healing and caring for God’s people, the needs of women should not be routinely dismissed. Addressing the pastoral care needs of women will require church leaders to step into arenas that may not be convenient or comfortable. In fact, it

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<sup>7</sup> FaithTrust Institute, “Our History,” accessed September 8, 2014, <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/about-us/history>.

<sup>8</sup> Stinson-Wesley, “Daughters of Tamar,” 230-231.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

will be time consuming, difficult and even disgusting. This is an area of pastoral care need that this author feels has become a 911 call. We must be deliberate and intentional in addressing it. We can no longer afford to ignore it or wait until it is convenient. If not now, when will we find the time?

The process for this project utilized a qualitative study. The action research method continued over a period of four weeks. Education was provided to the leaders to make them more aware of the problem by helping them to identify the needs of the population they serve. The leaders were also provided help in identifying the resources available. The groups shared ideas for programs and activities that would encourage and open the door for conversation about the issue of abuse between them and their congregation. The design of the program supported the leaders to begin building linkages between the church, the community, city, state and governmental agencies. Context and professional associates contributed their ideas and expertise to each phase of the project, as appropriate.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **SYNERGY**

The author of this work made her entrance into the world in a house on the corner of Ohea Street and Sunflower Lane in Greenville, Mississippi. She was brought into the world by a midwife, in the home of her parents. The home was a single story house, consisting of one large room, with a loft sleeping area. It had a pot belly stove in the middle of the room, which was used for cooking and heating the home. The author cherishes a replica of the hand-written birth certificate that is the official record of her birth. At one time the author had pictures of the home that she had taken on a visit during her adult life. The pictures have been lost and the home torn down, but the memory of it will always be with her.

It was her paternal grandparents who introduced her to church, to Jesus and to God. The message received was that it was expected that everyone went to church on Sunday and learned to be a good Christian. It is from this teaching that she credits the formation of her values and beliefs. There are many positive memories of going to church with her grandparents.

The most endearing memories of those days included dressing up and walking to church between proud and smiling grandparents. The author really liked to dress up. On the way to church, several neighbors would stop with kind greetings and give her either a

shiny nickel or penny to put in the offering at church. Sometimes they would give her a piece of sugar cane, which could be chewed like gum (after church of course).

The most frightening memory that she has of her early years is the look she once saw on grandfather's face. He was racing toward her and her little brother, who was attempting to cross a train track. When the train had passed he saw the author and her little brother standing safely on the other side of the track. She (at about three years of age) had talked her brother into going to visit their grandparents' house and had not cleared it with her parents. God was with them that day as they saw the train coming and did not try to cross the track. Her grandfather broke down in tears and held them so tightly that she could hardly breathe.

The most disturbing memories involved the move to Chicago and her life in Chicago. The author and her family moved to Chicago when she was approximately four years of age. The move to Chicago separated her from her beloved grandparents. Unfortunately, this soon was followed by the death of her grandfather.

Her parents, like many other people at that time, moved north to find work and what her parents thought was a better life for their family. The move eventually proved to be the beginning of the worst years of her life. Her introduction to the big city of Chicago was like a nightmare. Chicago was a big, cold and dirty place. This author thought it was strange that people lived in buildings instead of houses. The run-down tenement buildings had strange smells and were infested with vermin. She frequently had nightmares regarding the sightings of insects and mice.

There were quite a few losses in her early life. There was the loss of close contact with her grandparents and then the death of her grandfather. Life as she knew it

was forever changed with the move to Chicago. These were just the beginning of a series of challenges. Within the next few years, she had to deal with the death of her best friend and a sudden and tragic death of a boy that lived in her apartment building. Through the years, there were other deaths including the deaths of several relatives either by car accidents or shootings.

There were numerous deaths and traumatic incidents that occurred in the building she and her family first lived in. This included the tragic death of a young boy and the death of her best friend. There was another negative incident experienced while living in the building on Oakland Street. The sister of the friend who had died was burned. She had climbed on top of the stove to reach a cabinet and get a box of cookies. Her clothing caught on fire, and she was burned badly. In each case, this author struggled to make sense of what happened and had no support from adults in her life to help her understand those deaths.

Where was God during this time in her life? God, she thought, lived in the church building. That is why you went to church on Sunday. The author and her family were not church attenders at that time. The deaths of her young friends were attributed to them being disobedient. Each of her friends had not been following a directive given by an adult. Although she was not sure why they did not go to church then, she did recall that God appointed grownups to watch over the children to take care of them, teach them and keep them safe. In the eyes of a five year old, this was why it was important to be obedient.



The family eventually moved from the one bedroom, infested apartment. They moved to public housing. In the public housing apartment, they had three bedrooms. The building was clean and insect free. There were flowers planted around the building.

The family's stay in the large public housing building soon changed. Within a few years, it went from daisies to dandelions. Eventually, there was no grass or flowers, nor were there safe places to play outdoors. Gangs of teenagers roamed the grounds destroying and defacing the facility. The maintenance of the building did a 180-degree downhill turn. The elevators did not work most of the time. When they were working you had to enter and exit holding your nose. The stairwells were worse. People used the stairs as a public toilet. This made it difficult to get in and out the building without getting soiled. People were often confronted on the stairs and elevators, sometimes at gun point or with knives or other weapons. The building residents encountered everything from robbery to beating, rape and other acts of harassment. It is recalled that she and her family were victimized repeatedly.

She recalls having nightmares and became afraid to attempt to leave the building after being raped in the stairway. She was horrified and hysterical. Her attempts to get away were compromised after slipping and falling repeatedly in the mess of human waste that people left on the stairs. She never felt safe again living there. There was no professional treatment after the incident, which left her with physical and emotional scars. Her parents (with their limited understanding and knowledge) felt the best way to deal with the situation was not to talk about it. Her parents were not able to save her from that horrific incident but sincerely did their best at the time.

Her family had limited options for housing. Even though her father was working, his pay was not enough to afford a decent place. Her mother heard about some townhomes that had been built by the public housing authority. Her family began to pray that they would not be moved into one of the larger facilities, as they knew they would experience some of the same problems. God answered those prayers. The family got a place and moved right away. There were only four rows of townhomes in their new housing development and no high-rise buildings. Each row of homes housed six families. It was still public housing, but it was much better and safer. Most of the neighbors got to know each other. All were survivors of the larger public facilities. The author was grateful to finally have a chance to live a decent life. There was grass and the family planted flowers in their yard. They moved there when the author was a preteen and stayed until she reached young adulthood.

After the family moved out of the larger housing facility, her father began to drink and hang out with his buddies. She does not recall seeing or knowing that he drank before. The author did not like this at all, but of course she was not allowed to say this to her father. Somehow, he and her mother came to terms with this. An unspoken implication that was learned was that it was okay for a (working, responsible) man to get drunk sometimes. Females did not drink excessively (per the societal norm at that time). On occasion, her father would come home sloppy drunk and act foolishly. Her mother drew the line here and let him know this was not allowed.

One day the author asked her mother if she could attend the church that was across the street. She and her brothers were given permission to attend. They joined in the

marching and singing during the Vacation Bible School roundup. The author still recalls some of the songs. She always sang them as loudly as she could.

The author and her brothers continued to attend Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, at the local Baptist church. These two church activities were (and still are) among her favorite activities. She recalls that she fell in love with Jesus. She fell in love because Jesus loved “all the little children” and would watch over her (keeping her safe). This was an affirmation for her, that someone loved her just the way she was. This led to her acceptance of Jesus as her personal Lord and Savior at the age of twelve. It was the right thing to do (according to her parents), and she wanted to please them.

She continued to attend church regularly throughout her early years and into adulthood. There were very strict rules and roles for women and children at church (on discipline, what to wear and how to respond to the elders). It was not considered appropriate to question your teachers or anything that was in the Bible. Tradition at home included saying prayers at meal and bedtimes, reading from the Bible and reciting of scriptures.

It comes as no surprise to this author that her ministry context is within the church setting. As a child she found the church to be a place of spiritual comfort. At church she found hope and reassurance of God’s love. In God’s eyes we are all precious. Someone told her (probably a Sunday school teacher) that the word *precious* meant special. As an adult, her definition of the word expanded to treasured, prized and valued. However, she also learned that church can also be a source of discomfort. Considering the many early losses and childhood traumas, it comes as no surprise that she has passion for pastoral care.

Her parents had a strong faith. Her parents sent this author and her brothers to Sunday school. Unfortunately due to lack of decent clothing her mother shied away from church. This author did not realize that reading was also an issue. Her mother spent time at home sharing the Bible stories she knew and was always eager to hear what her children had learned. Her dad had similar concerns. His work schedule was also a consideration that had to be made.

Things were going well because her father found a better job with a meat packing company. The years he worked there are among the author's fondest memories. The company gave bonuses at Christmas along with free hams and turkeys for their workers. They also had a Christmas program each year. She recalls getting dressed up (in her best Sunday clothes) for this family night out. This made her feel special.

Other favorite memories from childhood include riding in the family car going nowhere in particular. The fact that they had a car gave them status. Often the family just took rides in the car. They sometimes went to see Christmas decorations or stopped at an ice cream stand in the summer.

Her father became a skilled auto mechanic (out of necessity) as the family car always needed something. At one time her father worked for a car dealership and was given a vehicle for his hard work. She was proud of her father and the things he did for the family. One good thing about having a car was that her family could look forward to trips back to Mississippi to see extended family. Those were happy times; however, following rules and directions was still important.

Before traveling, there were some very important talks about how to behave (to keep safe and alive). The trips always began before daybreak so they could arrive at the

destination by dinner time. Her mother packed food and drinks for the trip. The plan was to drive only in the day-time through the southern states (Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee), as it was not safe to stop or travel in these states after dark. There were no rest stops except at services stations. They had “colored designated” restrooms (which were never cleaned or stocked with tissue). The family had to be back in the car by the time her father filled up the tank and went to the restroom. There was always at least one other (male) driver. Her mother did not drive (acceptable societal norm). Most of the time, there were no problems and they arrived at their destination where a hot meal was prepared for them. There were times when her father pulled over to help another Negro family when he saw they had car trouble. Thus she learned the importance of helping others (even when they were not kin) and sticking together as a people.

As stated earlier, most of the trips were during the day to reach the destination without incident. The trips when traveling met with an incident left the most unpleasant memories. She always saw her father as a strong man, just like her grandfather. He always saw to it that the family had basic needs (food on the table and a roof over their heads). He protected them and saw to it that they were safe, as well as he could. There were incidents when she observed her father shaken and sweating (in humiliation), while being harassed (for no valid reason) by white policemen.

There was one instance when the harassment came from a white man who allowed his young sons to get in on the action to harass her family. The disrespect and humiliation with words was only the beginning. The entire family was called black, smelly and dirty. The young white children decided that she and her family were dirty and smelly because they had smeared feces all over themselves. They even made fun of

their hair, saying it was unruly and like steel wool. The white children even went so far as to check to see if the popular belief was true that “colored people” had tails like monkeys. This was her introduction to racial discrimination as a child. She did not know the impact that it would have on her life. Sometimes, the memories resurface at unpredictable and unexplainable times. She now realizes that she was traumatized.

Despite the concerns with racism and discrimination, the family continued to make the trip back home to Mississippi. The author’s parents taught her that family came first, no matter what and family needed to remain connected. This is a very valuable lesson this author continues to practice.

Her teen years were during turbulent times of racial uprising. She and her family watched Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on television. She and her family observed on television and read in the paper as people marched for fair housing and other rights. Watching and listening to the news stories was unsettling. When Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed, she was at school and found herself right in the middle of a racial riot. She and the other students were released early from school. She recalls that it felt like she was in the middle of having a nightmare, only she was awake. She did not know if she would ever get home. That was one of the longest days of her life.

On another occasion the author recalls she found herself in the midst of a dangerous situation, almost getting herself and her father killed as she tried to help a friend. Her father agreed to take her friend and her friend’s two children home. Her friend had been drinking heavily. As they entered the apartment, the author’s father realized that they stepped into the middle of a drug deal. She did not know that they were in danger as she busied herself getting her friend and her children settled in. Her father (being street

smart) quickly sized up the situation and led them both out of harm's way. She thanked God for that intervention. Shaken by the incident, this author shied away from drinking, although she would drink socially. She did not want to ever be like her friend, who was so drunk she could not take care of herself or her children.

The author was considered to be a "good child." One day (when she was in high school), she decided she wanted to wear her hair red. She was about fourteen years old. Her mother had given her some freedom to have whatever hair-style she wanted, as she was usually very conservative. The hairdresser was a trusted family friend and should have known better than to honor her request. However, she honored her request to dye her hair. The author was happy and delighted with her hair. When the author arrived home, her mother gasped for breath and threw up both hands when she saw her hair. The author felt badly that her mother was so upset with her. The author's mother washed and washed her hair over and over. The red color would not come out, as it was permanent dye.

Both her mother and father got extremely quiet about the hair color. Little did the author realize that red was thought to be an indecent color. Respectable Christian females did not wear this color. The hairdresser never saw the author or her mother again (or many of her mother's friends). Her parents did not kill her for that incident, but she felt as if it nearly killed them in shame. It was one lesson she would not forget. Thus began a continuous cycle of always working harder to please them. They all lived through it and eventually (when she was an adult) were able to talk and laugh about it. She believes that was probably was the worst thing she did in her teen years.

She did not do a lot of dating in high school. She had one boyfriend, who she eventually married after graduating. The rule on boyfriends was that you could only have one boyfriend at a time and no sex. There was no plan for when she could start dating. She almost lost the opportunity to go out on her first date. She had not told her parents about her date. Her father actually hit the wall (cracking it) when he heard about the date. The crack went from the ceiling to the floor. She was scared and wondered what her father would do to her date. Her date was thoroughly interrogated before he was allowed to take her out. She observed in silence and humiliation.

Despite the issues that came up in her childhood and teen years, she seldom felt like she had a bad life. She always felt that her parents did their best to make sure of that. Their love and commitment to family was appreciated. She observed that many of her friends and classmates did not have the same kind of relationships with their parents.

She attended a vocational high school. In this high school, she was able to take “Office Practice.” She learned office skills such as typing and filing. She attended cooking classes and sewing classes. These skills helped to prepare her for adulthood and a job as a secretary or a clerk. She enjoyed all her classes. She was grateful that she could at least obtain an office job after high school.

When it was time for her to graduate from high school, she had a paradigm shift. She now understood how proud her parents were and why. Her father was not as disruptive as he had been at her grade school graduation, screaming over and over that she was his daughter. She had been very embarrassed by his behavior. He was definitely as proud at her high school graduation. She was also proud of her accomplishment.



Eventually, she married her high school boyfriend. This, she was soon to realize, was one of the biggest mistakes in her life. Neither one of them was ready or had matured enough for marriage. With marriage came a move to Kansas. She had never been separated from her family until then. She had a nice church wedding. Full of hope for their future, she moved to Kansas with her new husband. Within a few months, she knew things were not going well. He was verbally abusive and always found ways to put her down. Usually his put downs were about her body or how she dressed. He often called her stupid. He was manipulative and controlling as “the man of the house.” He controlled all the money as well. She would receive an allowance when he wanted. His job had him working late and not coming home until early morning. She spent a lot of time alone in the apartment. She felt disappointed and isolated.

She was being abused in that relationship but did not know it at the time. She had no reference point for understanding what was happening to her. Her parents had always told her to never let a man hit her. She was not prepared to deal with the type of emotional abuse she encountered. She tried very hard to please him and be a good wife. Her efforts only left her frustrated and in tears. He stopped bringing food into the house and giving her money. He would start arguments and push her around. He appeared to take pride in being able to upset her. Sometimes the police were called. When the police arrived, he would be calm and cool, indicating to the police that she had lost her mind and that nothing was wrong. This relationship was devastating. Eventually, she gave up on him and left him.

They had been married and living together about nine months. She did not give birth to a child (in that relationship), but she was birthed into a new reality with a

paradigm shift in her understanding of the relationship between husband and wife. She spent the next year working in Chicago and living with her parents. She occasionally talked on the phone with her husband. He had started going to church and had become a deacon. She thought he had changed. He eventually talked her into returning to their relationship. With some reservations, she decided to go back to Kansas. He assured her that things would be better. He had moved to a new apartment that was closer to a bus line.

The first few days were great. However, it was quickly discovered to her disbelief that he had another woman and she had been living with him. There were still many personal items of his other woman in the apartment. He said he put her out because he wanted to be with his wife. It was hurtful to her to learn that he had been dealing with anyone else. It was a concern that he had put the woman out. She secretly hoped that the other woman had somewhere to go and wondered if he mistreated her, too. It had not even occurred to her to find someone else when they were apart. Even his (new) friends looked with suspicion when he introduced her as his wife.

The relationship began to spiral downhill as she noticed that he was becoming controlling again. He kept trying to get her to pose for pictures wearing only underwear or sexy night clothing, in suggestive poses. The pictures he said were for his pleasure. This made her terribly uncomfortable. The relationship did not feel right for her and she realized that she really did not know him anymore. He had changed. This was not the man she thought she had married.

One day when he left the apartment to do errands, she packed her things and called a cab. She cried all the way to the train station. There was a long wait for the next

train to Chicago. She continued to cry and pace the floor, as she was conflicted over the decision to leave him again. One of the ticket agents became concerned and told her to reconsider and give him another chance. She ended up spending one more night and left the next day. He agreed for her to go back to Chicago so she could work things out in her own mind. Although they talked, she decided not to return, as she had no trust in him. He made several attempts to win her back, but she would not go, for fear that he would only hurt her again. After a few years, she initiated and received a divorce. He did not contest it. She thanks God that she did not go back into that relationship. She is now more informed about domestic abuse and violence; things would have gotten worse instead of better.

The author's present ministry is with a congregation that is going through transition, as the pastor has moved on and they are without a permanent pastor. Just as transitions in one's personal life can be difficult, they can be even more difficult for a congregation. Each person experiences the changes on multiple levels. It involves many different people. Acceptance of change may come in stages.

When doing interim ministry work, one must look at many factors and situations that impact the people within the congregation. The Interim Ministry Conference of The Lutheran Church describes the needs of the congregation: "Such times of transition are often marked by congregational stress, hampering ministry and making a fulfilling church experience difficult. Intentional Interim Ministry is designed to restore congregational health by offering a safe bridge between challenging times and the selection of the next

permanent pastor.”<sup>1</sup> Consideration must be given to what is going on outside of the congregation that may impact the parishioners. We must include what is going on in their families, work life and community. We must also look at what is going on in the nation. Living in America, one cannot avoid being aware of the health care crisis, the job crisis and the changing economy.

This author can identify with and understand the complex feelings and behaviors that people go through when they are affected by their environment. Her educational studies in psychology and ministry and her life experiences interconnect and are valuable resources to bring to her ministry context. It is part of human nature to try to hold on to what is familiar and comfortable. Change elicits anxiety and fear. When people feel that they do not have choices or are forced to change they may become resistant. With change also comes “loss.” People go through grief when there is loss. How one navigates through their grief is very personal.

There are occasions of loss that serve as connecting points between the author’s spiritual autobiography and her ministry context. The loss of relationship is a common thread here. The author experienced loss with the death of her best friend and her beloved grandfather. She also experienced loss of relationship and familiar surroundings with the move from Mississippi to Chicago.

It is also important to know what things that individuals and families in the congregation value. Whenever possible, it is important to help them find a way to preserve it. The author’s family risked their lives to travel each summer to Mississippi to

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<sup>1</sup> Interim Ministry Conference, The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, accessed October 4, 2013, <http://interimministrylcms.org/>.

visit family in the midst of racial tensions. Remaining in contact with family was just that important. In her ministry context, she has found that the church highly values their children and youth. The programs for this population are constantly expanding. Money and resources always meet programming needs throughout the year and provide variety. The author also realized that involvement in programming engaged almost every adult on the church membership roll including the elderly who made contributions of time. Almost every adult embraced the fact that the youth today are the future of the church tomorrow.

As an African American woman, the author is very familiar with a variety of African beliefs and traditions. These beliefs and traditions (also known as proverbs) provide wisdom, guidance and direction to help an individual avoid some of the pitfalls and problems of life. One such tradition and belief is that there is a mythical bird called Sankofa that flies forward with its head turned looking backwards with an egg in its mouth, which represents the future: “Sankofa teaches us that we must go back to our roots in order to move forward. That is, we should reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of, can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated.”<sup>2</sup>

The author felt that that the wisdom behind this African belief provides perfect guidance for her now. Her assignment is to look for the places that her ministry context and her spiritual autobiography interconnect. She will use these findings as she discerns

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<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Dubois Learning Center, “The Meaning of the Symbolism of the Sankofa Bird,” accessed September 7, 2013, <http://www.duboislc.net/SankofaMeaning.html>.

where God is leading her in her ministry. Looking back at her life, especially during times of transition, was a painful process for the author. There was anxiety and tears because the author had not previously processed some of the negative experiences in her life.

Now that she has begun to work through them, she is able to move forward. As a minister she cannot afford to be stuck in the past. In order to be there for others, “we must first bind up our own wounds.”<sup>3</sup> She moves forward knowing that God was there to see her through. She also knows that God is directing her ministry to where she needs to be.

The author is an ordained minister with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination. The identity statement for the denomination says, “We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ we welcome all to the Lord’s table as God has welcomed us.”<sup>4</sup>

The fragmentation includes all things that divide our attention and challenge our faith and beliefs. This includes racism and sexism. The changing economy and the health care crisis are additional examples. Some of these manifestations can be seen in the changing dynamics of our cities, our communities and our churches. Some of the things that fragment us are the things most of us face on a daily basis, like trying to make a living, dealing with aging parents and health issues. Women, because of their many complex roles, must juggle various aspects of their lives in a constant state of fragmentation and change. As a part of her doctoral project, the author would specifically

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<sup>3</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York, NY: Random House, 2010), 88.

<sup>4</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, “Our Identity,” accessed April 3, 2013, and August 26, 2013, <http://disciples.org/our-identity/>.

like to look at ministering to women and how they can be resilient and empowered to fulfill their roles within their homes, churches and society. This author feels that the impact for women during pastoral transition is significant as they are often very involved in the church.

The author realizes that most of the times in her life when she felt most uncomfortable were the result of situations that she encountered in her environment. When her family moved from Mississippi, this was a major move for her. The author also grew up at a time when the civil rights movement was at its peak. The family's safety was at risk each time they traveled from Chicago to Mississippi. She did not realize that the move to Chicago would have a profound impact on her life.

Shortly after the transition to Chicago, her grandfather died and the family returned to Mississippi for the funeral. At four years of age there was no understanding of what death was and no one attempted to explain it. She was left to sort out and process her feelings. Confused, she thought his death had something to do with her family leaving for Chicago.

Another insight and valuable lesson for the author is that God has given her the strength to be able to continue to press forward, even when she encountered difficulty. As stated earlier, it is hard to step outside one's comfort zone or to try something new and different. Sometimes there are rediscoveries of strengths and skills that one has forgotten.

The author knows that every situation and experience in her life had an effect on her. Each time she encountered negative experiences she realizes now that her attitude was an important factor in how she addressed situations. Transforming negative situations into positive ones is possible; however, it must start from within. It takes hard

work and courage to face situations that are hurtful. The lesson she learned is that she had to face her fears with a positive attitude. As a minister, she can help others do the same.

Two difficult and hurtful life-changing events in her life emerged and are named in the author's spiritual autobiography. The first was the sexual abuse she encountered as a young girl. The second was being abused in her first marriage. At the time of each abuse, the author had a very narrow understanding of what constituted abuse. Knowing how to handle such a "hot topic" is essential for today's pastoral care. Speaking truth and addressing issues from the pulpit has been noted to be very effective in addressing these types of situations. Parishioners are dealing with these and other issues. They need to know that the pastor can help them to handle anything that they encounter.

Recognition that both situations constituted abuse for the author came more than twenty years later. The author was taking a class on domestic violence and abuse for ministers. The author was outraged. The question was, mad at whom? Was it herself that she was angry with, or her ex-husband? Was it her mother for not educating her, or society? Or was it the church? The church can serve as a place for resources, education and comfort. Some congregations and denominations now have specific programs that address these kinds of issues. Unfortunately there are many that do not. The present ministry context (at the time of this writing) has been proactive in addressing such issues.

Ignorance is definitely not bliss! Recognition of abuse can come quicker when one is educated and informed. The author feels that every woman and every teenage girl needs to be educated on domestic violence and abuse. The ability to be informed allows one to be proactive and aware of how to handle such situations. These situations of abuse made a life-altering shift in her life. Thus, these personal experiences have fueled her



passion to form her thesis around pastoral care of women who have been victimized and abused.

In writing her spiritual autobiography, she realized that her family never put much emphasis on expressions of feelings because it was considered a weakness. As the memories resurfaced in her writing, she noticed that she masked all of the feelings around the incidents that took place when she lived on Oakland Street and in the public housing facility. She has difficulty recalling how she really felt. There was no context for her to relate to that allowed for exploration of feelings or to the asking of questions. She also realized that she never grieved after the death of her grandfather or her childhood friend since feelings were not welcomed expressions. When something bad happens you acknowledged it and just “sucked it up and moved on.” Therefore, the author had little or no closure in regards to the traumas and losses endured in her early life.

She now knows how important it is to be able to fully process one’s feeling in situations of trauma and loss. The horrific and appalling conditions regarding health and safety, as well as the systematic discrimination, that was endured by her and the other residents in the public housing facility has, in her adult years, been documented and researched. Relief and validation of her experience came as she read that research.

As a result of the research, many of the public housing complexes were condemned and demolished. The physical and psychological effect on the residents was life altering. Although she and other residents “survived,” the scars remain. She found solace in scripture from the book of Habakkuk. She often quotes this scripture when she faces other challenges. This passage serves as a personal testimony and reminder of God’s presence in the life of the author:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
     and no fruit is on the vines;  
 though the produce of the olive fails  
     and the fields yield no food;  
 though the flock is cut off from the fold  
     and there is no herd in the stalls,  
 yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
     I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
 GOD, the Lord is my strength;  
     He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
     and makes me tread upon the heights. (Hab. 3:17-19)

The author realized that she had many experiences in her life that challenged her. She has found being in interim ministry challenging as well. The lack of permanency and constant moving has been challenging. A pastor has to quickly assess the needs of the ministry context in order to begin the work with a congregation. Learning to balance and address one's personal needs and relationships must be attended to as well.

Life is full of challenges and change. The author realizes that changes, even though they have been challenging, are a source of blessing. The moves and changes have not allowed her ministry to become stagnant. A well-known phrase asserts, "God can turn your mess into a message" when it is used for someone else to benefit.

The author spent a great deal of her life attempting to meet the expectations of others. Many congregants do the same. The interim period is an opportunity to allow everyone in the congregation to participate in new ways. Often the voices that are not heard are the youth. They are often ignored or just told what to do. Sometime, the voices that are not heard are the elderly, as their contributions are no longer appreciated.

The author notes that many women experience the same thing. Societal expectations limit the potential for women to achieve or direct their own lives. Women sometimes become obsessed with trying to meet others' expectations. They try to be the

“good mother” or the “good wife.” Women often juggle multiple roles and responsibilities. Many women are not given the opportunity to pursue their personal goals and dreams. The poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes speaks to the issue as he refers to the loss experienced by those living in Harlem. The poem speaks to how the author feels about her dreams and goals for her life. It truly feels sometimes like the beginning of the poem:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?<sup>5</sup>

The past informs and shapes who she is today. The opportunity to write her spiritual autobiography in this way has proven to be a powerful healing force. It is recognized by the author that situations from the past that were the most painful and hurtful were buried beneath layers of denial and fear. She is now beginning to understand why. It has been a relief and a blessing to uncover these areas of pain and to rediscover and claim her personal strengths. A quote by Eleanor Roosevelt that has helped her to stay strong is taped above her desk: “You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I have lived this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’ You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Langston Hughes, “Harlem [Dream Deferred],” *Poem Hunter*, accessed September 17, 2013, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/harlem-dream-deferred/>.

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt, “quotation 2558 from Laura Moncur’s Motivational Quotes,” *The Quotations Page*, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/2558.html>.

Her parents did everything that they could do to prepare her for life. The truth is no matter what they did, even within their own limitations, it would have never been enough. When she took Clinical Pastoral Education, she uncovered and faced some painful areas of her life. The lesson learned is that other people, especially those who want to do you harm, can always find and use your areas of weakness against you.

You must know yourself and attend to those areas of pain in your life. Another lesson learned is to always speak up for your personal needs. This also means to not allow other people to inappropriately speak into or attempt to control your life. The person who knows best what you need is you. She discovered that faith could be a very empowering and positive resilient factor in your life. The following scripture captures this for her as recorded in Isa. 52:2, "Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; loose the bonds from your neck, O captive daughter of Zion!"

One of the most important things in her life has been her call to ministry. God has a sense of humor. She put up a good fight, regarding her call. Her husband was already in school working on his ministry degree. A few years after he graduated, she found herself getting that urge to be in God's service. It was more like an urge to know God and to spread the gospel. As things evolved she found herself in the registrar's office at the seminary being registered for classes. At that time she wanted to do ministry that kept her connected to children and families. She had heard about a program for Marriage and Family Ministry that included a counseling component. This seminary did not have such a program. The registrar was called away for a phone call and the author began to explore some brochures that had information about the programs that the seminary offered. She found a brochure that had a dual degree agreement with the seminary and a local school

of psychology program. She got excited because at the possibilities this opportunity offered for her ministry. She explored inquired about enrollment.

She found herself caught up with passion for learning as she took extra classes at both schools. Whenever she found a class of interest she took it. She completed her studies in psychology and ministry and prepared for graduation. She received a master's degree in both disciplines (ministry and psychology).

The author was blessed with the opportunity early in her ministry education to be mentored by two remarkably strong, God fearing women. Together they founded a church and later a school for children. They broke new ground in their denomination, becoming the first to be female co-pastors of one congregation in their denomination.

The opportunity to be mentored by these two female ministers was inspiring. Working with them was a valued experience for the author, as she did not have the opportunity in her formative years to see women in service to the Lord or in respected leadership roles in the church or community. When their denominational leaders told them “no” and tried to redirect them, they found a way to do it anyway. The result was a dynamic ministry that became a model for their denomination.

The level of personal encouragement and support the author received became her model for ministry to other women (lay and clergy). She continues to mentor women. This ministry model of encouragement has been very effective. Many of these women have taken on leadership positions in their communities, their congregations and the wider church. More importantly they have gained courage and forged a way to reach their own goals.

As ordained clergy, the author (and many other ordained women) has experienced resistance from some individual congregants to accept and respect her pastoral leadership. The author has also experienced open acceptance and support for her ministry. The author and many other clergy-women have found that much of the resistance comes from the females. They may not speak openly about their concerns, but demonstrate a lack of respect in the treatment of female clergy. It has been noted that respect for male clergy is generally given without official reservation, but female clergy must meet a higher standard. Male leaders have outwardly expressed their concern about addressing the author as reverend or pastor or acknowledging her ordination. However, some of these same leaders and congregants have worked with her and gotten to know her within the pastoral context and they now approach her with a different attitude of respect.

The concern for female leadership in ministry continues to be present, even though women are holding prominent positions in the local and wider church regardless of denomination. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) as a denomination ordains women, without reservation. However, each congregation has the autonomy to call their own pastor. Although there are many examples of women doing well as pastors, there is still resistance to their leadership. The denominational president is a woman, who has been elected to a second term!

One day the author stepped out on faith and dared to address another one of her dreams. She started Faith Works Ministries. This ministry, which was focused on empowering women, convened a women's conference. The focus was to challenge minority women to claim their spiritual gifts and walk in the power of their faith. The call

and direction for this ministry must have come from God. The author at that time did not have the confidence or knowledge to accomplish it. She did not even feel she had permission to pull off such a feat. God had to be in it.

She had seen and heard about women's conferences through the media, but had never attended one. Many women have so many obligations and responsibilities that they cannot find the time or budget to attend one. This conference would provide an opportunity for those women who could not attend one of the larger conferences. She wanted that experience for herself and for other women like her. She used local women (as workshop leaders, preachers and vendors) who would likely not otherwise have had opportunity to share their gifts. The ladies in the community were delighted.

Although women's groups and ministries are common within the local church, the focus, as she experienced it, was more about fellowship, sharing and local mission. This was an appropriate focus for the women's fellowship for women in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Women's groups and conferences now focus on equipping and empowering. Social issues such as domestic violence and sexual harassment are more openly explored. They encourage women to support each other in reaching their goals and building their skills. Something awesome happens when women come together in one group. Women conferences are about empowerment and the uplifting of women, in every cultural and economic setting. This type of female mentoring and bonding is remarkably powerful.

The author would like to continue the work she began years ago, encouraging and supporting women in their quest to break through barriers placed on them. The author feels that her struggle to break through barriers and find her voice and inner strength was difficult, due to lack of support. Helping women find their voices and the inner strength

to pursue their dreams is now her mission. She feels that others can benefit from what she has learned. She is happy to share and provide encouragement.

At this time, the author envisions her project to be a program that will minister to the minds, bodies and spirits of the participants. The author feels these are the connection points for balance in people's lives. The overall focus will be on empowerment, building confidence, self-esteem and resiliency.

Who is this woman of God now as she looks back at her life? First and foremost she is informed by how she is shaped and formed by her past experiences. She is a survivor who has faced many obstacles. Spiritually, she is a woman who continues to be blessed by God's grace and mercy. She has learned to go forward in the strength she has. As an ordained minister, she is determined to serve God and walk in God's grace. Spirituality informs and shapes who she is as a woman, parent, spouse, citizen and family member. God is the center of her life. Everything she does is informed by that reality. An African Proverb, the bundle of sticks, comes to her mind. The sticks represent each component of her life. Each of the sticks in the bundle can easily be broken when it stands alone, but bundled together and tied they are stronger and cannot be broken. This is why it is important for her to remain connected to her faith, the faith community and her family and close friends. These are the sources that bring her strength.

There have been and will continue to be situations in her life that are difficult and sources of struggle. These situations will sometimes leave her feeling broken and abused, but her faith has come to and always will be the cornerstone that gives her strength. The wisdom that has helped her to be strong is "the story of the broken bones." After a bone is broken, when it heals, the place where it was broken becomes the strongest point. As



she reflects now she realizes that she is able, through God, to make it through any situation in life that she encounters. The author would like to end this writing with a quote by Carl Jung: “Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakes.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Philosiblog, “Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside awakes,” accessed November 1, 2014. <http://philosiblog.com/2011/09/05/your-vision-will-become-clear-only-when-you-can-look-into-your-own-heart-who-looks-outside-dreams-who-looks-inside-awakes/>.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The focus for this doctoral project is improving the response of church leaders in addressing the pastoral care needs of women who have been victimized or abused. The action research project is designed to focus on leadership and the skills needed to effectively address the pastoral care needs of women. In her research, this author has found that the needs of women have often been overlooked due to the prevalence of patriarchal attitudes and values. These attitudes and values place women on the margins of society and do not allow women to fully receive the gospel message of love and acceptance. This author feels that every female and male in church leadership needs to claim responsibility and make a commitment to become equipped to be supportive to women.

A very important step to becoming equipped to minister to others is for leaders to lift up positive images of women in scripture. This is necessary because the stories of women are often preached and taught from a negative perspective. Leaders need to become more aware of how their attitudes and values impact women. When a woman constantly hears negative images of women in the Bible being preached or taught, it can be very disempowering. This can lead to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Helping women to locate themselves in the scripture, in ways that faithfully represent

their contexts, has an empowering effect for women. This builds both self-esteem and self-worth.

Women live complex and complicated lives. It is a balancing act. A woman is often juggling multiple tasks, roles and schedules. Those roles often revolve around responsibilities for the home and the family. Women also work outside the home, particularly in the church. These roles often get complicated because they change often. Unfortunately, the social concerns of the day, such as the health care crisis, financial concerns and violence complicate their lives as well. The irresponsible actions of others lead to more complications. For example, a woman may need to take care of her grandchildren because the parents are not able or willing to properly care for them. Although the reasons she must take on this role of caretaker may vary, the bottom line is she must do it (usually because no one else will).

We are living in very challenging and changing times. Women are significantly affected. An African proverb often heard by this author says, “Women are the glue that holds the family together.” Therefore, women often need to think and act quickly, adapt and respond to changes.

Life for women is one of constant change and transition, which makes their lives a constant balancing act. In crisis, Christian women first turn to their church for support and resources. If those supports and resources are not available or limited, she may become discouraged and disappointed.

In regards to addressing the pastoral care needs of women, it matters what the pastor and other church leaders think and hold of value. Women have always had to contend with the negative images of women that are preached from pulpits across

America. The stories of women in the Bible have reinforced patriarchal values and beliefs that continue to prevail today. As a result of this constant negative feedback, many women have formed limitations that they are unable to move beyond. The constant messages of negativism create a sense of helplessness that some women have resigned to accept as irreversible.

When a woman has been abused, it affects her in every area of her life. It also changes the way she sees the world and relates to others. This author believes that it is crucial to her recovery from abuse that she hears positive messages about women being lifted up from the passages in the Bible. With these factors in mind, the author will interpret texts from both the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament scripture can be found in Ruth 1:1-22. Here we will focus on the stories of Ruth and Naomi. The New Testament scripture is from the book of Luke, where we will focus on the stories of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). In each exegesis, we will be focusing on the character strengths and limitations of these women. Careful attention will be given to lifting up the wisdom of these women and how these women dealt with their situations.

The outline for this work will closely (but not entirely) follow the one utilized in the book *Biblical Interpretation*. This work will include topics on locating the readers and reading context, encountering the biblical text, a close reading of the biblical text, reading contextually and engaging the text, other readers and our communities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick C. Tiffany and Sharon H. Ringe, *Biblical Interpretations: A Roadmap* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 131-144.

It is a fact that there are only two books in the entire Bible that are named after women. These books are Ruth and Esther, both of which are found in the Old Testament. The fact that there are only two books named after women establishes the patriarchal values that were relevant at that time in biblical history. Women do not even appear to be essential to the stories in the Bible unless they are connected to a male figure, making them shadow or subordinate figures.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Ruth demonstrates the inner strength and wisdom of women and how these characteristics can be utilized to change one's life circumstances. Ruth's and Naomi's story can offer hope in the face of adversity. Ruth and Naomi's situation may have been deemed impossible and hopeless to others, but their fate as widows was not written in stone. These two women literally rewrote script: "Deprived of husband and protector, a widow was exposed to all sorts of mean actions and extortions."<sup>3</sup> However, women can be empowered to move from victims to victors by utilizing their wisdom and faith in God. They could have easily given up and resigned themselves to living out the rest of their lives as widows. There are stories throughout world history of married women who commit suicide to be buried with their husbands.

Women who read this text may resonate with the fact that women do not yet have equality in most situations. Even today the life of a woman is judged or measured by her attachment to a male. Too many of our mothers, sisters and daughters suffer alone because of the inequality and biased treatment they receive. Too few women have learned

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1988), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

how to recognize and to utilize the inherent strength of their individual and collective wisdom to empower themselves as they join forces with each other. Unfortunately, relationships between women have often been characterized by competition and jealousy more often than by collaboration and support. In essence, many women have not learned how to be supportive or the value of being resources to each other.

Too many men feel that this is not their concern and do not even recognize it as a problem. In the church, those called to minister to the needs of others are not being faithful when they take on these attitudes. In recognition of this oversight one has to be not only attentive but also deliberate in opening themselves up to seeing new ways to interpret the scriptures.

### **Old Testament**

It is a fact that there are only two books in the entire Bible that are named after women. These books are Ruth and Esther, both of which are found in the Old Testament. Ruth is established here as a major figure in the Bible. The fact that there are only two books named after women in the Bible can be seen as further documentation that women are generally not considered important.

In the Old Testament passage, Ruth is a widow and a daughter-in-law to Naomi. Orpha was the other daughter-in-law. The women were traveling to the border so that Naomi could return to her native Bethlehem. The story centers on the relationship of Ruth and Naomi. Ruth and Naomi are great examples of how women from two different cultures can work together and achieve success in ways that benefit each of them.

When doing an exegesis of scripture about women, the interpreter should take care to do so with insight and a thorough understanding the plight of women. To thoroughly understand the text one must read with the recognition of how the social world impacts interpretation.<sup>4</sup> We must always be cognizant of the fact that in the Bible many “women are left on the margin if not completely left off the page.”<sup>5</sup> Many of the women in scripture are not named. We know little about their lives. Their lives seem unimportant and are spoken about only in relationship to male figures. Since many women spoken about in the Bible remain nameless, it is important to find positive interpretation about those who are named. Women must be given the opportunity to hear interpretations of the stories of women in the Bible that include the sharing of their “joys, worries, burdens, thoughts and dreams,” without compromise or trivialization.<sup>6</sup> This opportunity is provided in the story of Ruth and Naomi.

The story of Ruth and Naomi takes place after the rule of Judges had ceased. Ruth had been married to Mahlon. Mahlon was the eldest son of Elimelek and Ruth. Elimelek had taken his family to live in Moab. The move was to escape the famine of their own land. His sons, Mahlon and Kilion, had grown up in a foreign land. We can only guess that Elimelek and his family had forgotten or chose not to practice their native customs. There is no indication that Elimelek or his wife Naomi had protested against or gave blessings to the marriage.

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<sup>4</sup> Tiffany and Ringe, *Biblical Interpretations*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 35.

Elimelek's sons married outside their culture. There is no indication about when or how long they were married. There was no indication of law that forbade the marriage between Israelites and Moabites. It can be assumed that it was not common. Since Elimelek had taken his family to live in Moab, one could only assume that there were other Israelites who did the same. An unanswered question this author would like to know is "Why did the sons not marry one of the women from other Israelite families?" With all of the beliefs and customs that existed at that time, one wonders if the marriages were protested by others. Mahlon and Ruth had no children. Ruth, however, was not barren. She bore a child to Boaz later. This author speculates that neither of Elimelek's sons having children was considered punishment for their marriage to foreigners.

As the sons of Elimelek had grown to the age of marriage, why did he not insist on them going back to Israel to locate appropriate mates? Although he did not take them, they were old enough to return on their own. Had Elimelek cut the ties with their native Israel permanently? If that were the case, why was Naomi traveling back? One can only speculate, as there are no answers. Since the care of widows was the expectation of the culture, it was better for Naomi to return to her people and beg them to embrace her.

There also appears to be some mystery around the death of Elimelek. We are told that he died, but we can only speculate on when, why and how. How long did the sons live after the death of their father? There is also mystery around the death of the sons. The need to acknowledge that there were limitations on determining the exact cause of death, but we have nothing to make any determination. We also do not know if the brothers died at the same time or further apart. Let us now take a closer look at the scripture on the plight of Ruth and Naomi:



In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons — would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!" At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she replied. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.<sup>7</sup>

Many married women today can identify with this “bitter sweet” in-law relationship in this story. Relationships of this type are often portrayed by the media in this millennium as strained by competition for attention, strong wills or opinions. The key word here is “often,” as some relationships between in-laws are pleasant. Many women would probably jump at the opportunity to be released from their in-law relationships. It was acceptable in those days that “[c]hildless widows usually returned to their parental home.”<sup>8</sup> It is somewhat puzzling to find the women weeping as we read this passage. However, this fits with the social beliefs that women can be very emotional. They may also be in tears over the hopelessness of their situation as widows. For Ruth and Orpah, their grief is doubled because it includes the fact that they are childless.

It is somewhat surprising that Ruth, one of her two daughters-in-law, quickly identifies a need to stay with her. This, however, fits with the traditional role of caretaker that women often assume, often without being asked. Naomi was probably too old to care for her own needs. The role of caretaker can be seen as an act of responsibility and selflessness. The reasons for her actions are unexplained in the text. Perhaps, Ruth’s instinct to be a caregiver outweighs her concerns to provide for her own care needs.

Since the author of this passage of scripture did not address in depth the abuse or the perilous circumstances of the plight of a widow, one has to read and interpret beyond the words on the page. Women may find it difficult to see the dynamics and insights the

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<sup>7</sup> Ruth 1:1-22, The New International Version.

<sup>8</sup> Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible*, 17

book of Ruth or the passage has to offer them. The message in this passage can easily be missed or misinterpreted. If the message is misinterpreted instead of bringing healing and hope, it brings more disappointment.

Reading in context, the question arises as to how this book came to be named after a woman. There has got to be a reason, especially when many of the women in the Bible are left unnamed. The named women in the Bible are generally connected to a male figure. They are secondary characters and the story is told of how the female fits into the life of the male, as primary character. In this instance, Ruth is eventually moved from a lower position as a widow and a gleaner of the field and granted status worthy of recognition linking her to the lineage of David.<sup>9</sup> This connects her as an ancestor of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> The book of Ruth also gives the reader a view of what domestic life was like, “lifting up the curtain of privacy which veiled domestic life.”<sup>11</sup>

In reviewing the situation of Naomi and Ruth, the reader can assume that they were frightened and had little hope, for their future looked bleak (according to recognized societal norms of that day). What could they do? Society had left them with few options that led to disappointment, anger, a state of vulnerability and on the margin. It was a natural human response for them to grieve their situation.

A close reading of the text makes us aware of how much is left unsaid and subjected to interpretation. This leaves any reader to either read between the lines, make

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<sup>9</sup> Albert Barnes, “Ruth,” in *The Bible Commentary: Exodus to Esther (Barnes’ Notes)*, ed. F. C. Cook, 1847, Reprint (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Books, 2005), 473.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

assumptions by what they already know, or be informed by the context from which they read. This reader notes that there are no direct references to prayer before making major decisions. One should recall the historical reference to the piousness that was part of the life that they lived. It appeared on the first reading that both Naomi and Ruth made their decisions very quickly and without the benefit of prayer or divine guidance.

The entire book reads somewhat idealistically. The two women traveling alone (by foot), without incident is not realistic. They were likely abused. The fact is that the precarious position the women were in can be viewed in the light of their lowly status. Simply put, the circumstances of their lives did not matter. They were unimportant. Thieves often lurked along the road making it “a dangerous trip for two unaccompanied women.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, it would have been dangerous even with husbands. The women would likely have been abused if their husbands were killed or captured by others traveling the same roads. The victors would have likely seen them as acquired property, subjected to their will. The author of the book of Ruth choose not to address any of the dangers of the situation. Neither were the feelings and thoughts of the women explored or named.

Most readers will likely grasp the sense of helplessness that the women were experiencing in their lives. It was likely that they felt powerless as they no longer had the protection of their husbands and sons. Fear was likely a big factor also. In those days it may have been acceptable for the female to commit suicide as life without that male protector was destined to be unbearably difficult. Naomi was in a more perilous position

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<sup>12</sup> F. B. Huey, Jr., “The Book of Ruth,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 524.

as she and her family had broken ties with their country during the period of famine. Would they even accept her if she returned? Choosing to go forward in their lives had to take a lot of courage. This author feels that the choice to move forward was an act of courage. They were desperate to find a way to survive. Their actions fit with what this author sees as resiliency. Resiliency is a positive characteristic often demonstrated by women who survive domestic violence and abuse. As we compare the situation in the text with experiences of abused women that most of us can relate to, we must ask ourselves if there is a personal agenda here. The narrative itself is “deceptively simple,” leaving the readers in the dark.<sup>13</sup> This may make many readers doubt that there was any intention of giving us a peek at domestic life. There is no presentation of what domestic life was like in that era.

There is, however, a cleverness in the unfolding of the story. The unknown author of the text carefully weaves a story that moves Ruth and Naomi from the role of victims to victors. Naomi sees herself as useless without husband or sons, and she self-identifies as “empty,” equating her worth as reproductive only.<sup>14</sup> This was her reason for telling her daughters-in-law to return home: “For Naomi, marriage and sons are the only source for a woman’s security and value.”<sup>15</sup> Naomi’s loss had overshadowed her pleasant personality, causing her to be a bitter woman.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, “Ruth,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, eds., Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), 78.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible*, 116.

Upon return to her homeland, she insists that her name be changed to Mara, which means “bitterness.”<sup>17</sup> Naomi chose to openly express her belief that the Lord had brought calamity upon her. Naomi, like many women, had subscribed to the role society had given to her. If she had protested, she would have met with rejection and not been accepted back to her homeland. The blessing that Ruth was providing was not apparent.<sup>18</sup> There is no clear message in the text (at this point) that Naomi had any gratitude for Ruth’s devotion to her.

There are several recurring themes in the text. One theme is Naomi’s constant assertion that she is empty (and therefore a bitter woman). The term empty means “widowed, childless, and poor.”<sup>19</sup> Naomi left “full,” with a husband and two sons, only to return emptied and with Ruth tagging along. Ruth is now considered a foreigner; Ruth (for her own survival) clings to her mother-in-law and the younger women in the field.<sup>20</sup>

The main recurring theme of this text is the bonding between the two women. Each becomes a foreigner in the homeland of the other. In the beginning of this passage Ruth made a commitment. Naomi seemed to be unaware of the level and expectation of the commitment made by Ruth. Perhaps she was putting Ruth’s commitment to the test. Naomi obviously realized the determination of her daughter-in-law and saw that it would

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<sup>17</sup> Levine, “Ruth,” 118.

<sup>18</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 2, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1953), 843.

<sup>19</sup> Huey, “The Book of Ruth,” 525.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

do no good to argue further with her.<sup>21</sup> Others praise Ruth's unselfish devotion later in the text. Ruth was destined to eventually give Naomi a blessing "greater than that of seven sons."<sup>22</sup> Ruth, "through her loyalty, fortitude and cleverness, secures the future for herself, her mother-in-law, and the Davidic Line."<sup>23</sup>

The power of joining forces to work toward a common goal is evident in the story. This was rare and should have been given some attention. This is consistent with the fact that women were regarded as unimportant. In this instance, the women were dependent on each other for survival. Not only did they survive, they thrived. They eventually gained greater social status than they had as widow, after Ruth married Boaz.

Ruth and Naomi modeled character traits, in their faith and toward each other, that are certainly appropriate for women today. Naomi did not openly acknowledge Ruth's devotion to her. The experience did, however, prove to be enough to eventually soften Naomi's heart toward Ruth. Naomi appears to have become a less bitter person. Their ability to get along and work together to meet their mutual needs is a lesson in the value of their collaboration. They model diversity and tolerance in their acceptance of each other. They are from two different clans of people with different systems of beliefs and values. This did not appear to hinder their relationship. Ruth was always going to be a Moabite woman living in a strange land. She was initially accepted because of her sincere devotion and attentiveness to Naomi.

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<sup>21</sup> Huey, "The Book of Ruth," 524.

<sup>22</sup> Levine, "Ruth," 78.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

“The Bible has been one of the most important means by which a woman’s place in society has been defined.”<sup>24</sup> Biblically derived attitudes have prevailed throughout history. Even today, women continue to face multiple barriers that lead to economic insecurity.<sup>25</sup> Many women who become widows or leave abusive situations often find themselves without needed skills or find that their skills are not up to date. This impairs their ability to make it on their own. The important thing to note is that women today have more choices. There are support systems and resources available that allow them to go back to school to get training. There is also support for child-care and housing if needed.

Ruth used manipulation and her charms to gain what she desired and needed to survive. This she did on the advice of Naomi. This is something women are often accused of doing. It is often perceived as devious and negative behavior. Naomi also advised her to stay near the younger women in the field to get attention. Youthfulness was valued in that day and still is in today’s society. Ruth appeared to be portrayed as still attractive enough to gain male attention. However, she was also portrayed as clever and wise. Unfortunately, these traits in females are not always appreciated.

The cleverness and wisdom of both Naomi and Ruth afforded them the opportunity to move beyond the usual expectation of life as widows. Their story provides hopefulness and empowerment for female readers and hearers of the text. This can be

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<sup>24</sup> Levine, “Ruth,” xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Alexandria Cawthorne, “The Straight Facts on Women in Poverty,” *Center for American Progress*, October 8, 2008, accessed December 28, 2013, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2008/10/08/5103/the-straight-facts-on-women-in-poverty/>.



possible if they are able to receive it by looking for and locating themselves in the story, moving beyond the words on the page, looking between the margins. Empowerment cannot come if a woman is unable to locate herself in the story.

Ruth was probably no stranger to hard work. We get a glimpse of what it was like for her physically. Anyone who has ever done work as a field hand picking crops knows that it is hard, backbreaking work. One can only imagine that there were days when she wanted to stay home. She always remembered that she needed to take care of herself and her mother-in-law. Women today are not strangers to work or responsibility either.

Women often find themselves in relationship with each other. All relationships have some degree of choice in how interaction takes place. Christian women often find themselves relating to other women in fellowship groups and through work in the church. It is important to remember that each person has a stake in any relationship. We can choose to build each other up or tear each other down. We must make conscious and responsible choices. A popular and familiar bit of wisdom is to do unto others as they do unto you.

### **New Testament**

We have looked closely at the relationship between Ruth and Naomi; now let us do an analysis of the story of Mary and Martha. We find in this story a different type of relationship between two women, as Mary and Martha are sisters. Luke 10:38-42 reads:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparation that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord don't you care

that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things... Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.”<sup>26</sup>

The first reading of the text appears to be presenting a negative relationship between the sisters. Previous sermons often pointed to Jesus scolding Martha. Although it is commonly preached this way, that is not the only available interpretation for this text. A closer examination of the text may yield some different themes.

Many times the text has been preached with the emphasis that Martha is being rebuked or “put in her place.” Martha’s complaint has also been interpreted as “whining.” Often this word has been used when speaking of complaints by women. Whining is defined as to complain in an annoying way.<sup>27</sup> Use of the word whining “trivializes” the concerns raised by women. There is nothing empowering for women about that. This is a good example of the sexist attitudes and marginalization women endure. The word trivialize means to make (something) seem less important or serious than it actually is.<sup>28</sup> To trivialize concerns voiced by women makes their concerns seem less important. That is likely not the message Jesus was attempting to convey.

Unfortunately, it is easy to misunderstand or misinterpret the response given by Jesus. One does not necessarily need to be a Bible scholar to recognize that when Jesus spoke there was a deeper message behind his words. If we see Jesus as “teacher,” then we

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<sup>26</sup> Luke 20:38-42. The New International Version.

<sup>27</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “whining,” accessed May 24, 2015, <http://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/whining>.

<sup>28</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “trivialize,” accessed May 2, 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trivialize>.

should be drawn to examine the message behind his words. His response may sound simple, but it is not. There is a lesson to be learned.

We need to make a note: “Jesus did not blame Martha for being concerned. He was only asking her to set her priorities.”<sup>29</sup> This text can be uncomfortable for some women, as it pits sister against sister.<sup>30</sup> The response given by Jesus was unusual and caused some confusion. However, Jesus spoke with authority and that made a difference for Martha, as she did not ask again.

If Jesus wanted to lovingly bring to Martha’s attention that Jesus needed her to recognize that there were other ways to be hospitable, then it was appropriate. This author feels that calling Martha by name demonstrated that there was a relationship between them that was valued. He would have just called her “woman,” if there were no relationship. Jesus wanted her to prioritize.<sup>31</sup> Martha is presented as going beyond the normal expectations of serving. This makes her efforts look like busyness and excessive. Learning to prioritize is an important lesson we can glean from this text. In reference to the author’s project, we can see the response of Jesus as one of pastoral care. Sometimes we need to slow down and reassess the situation. Jesus was able to weed through Martha’s complaint. Martha’s anxiousness was clouding and limiting her ability to enjoy her guest.

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<sup>29</sup> *The Life Application Study Bible*, The New International Version (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991), 1824.

<sup>30</sup> Jane Schaberg, “Luke,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), 377.

<sup>31</sup> *The Life Application Study Bible*, 1825.

Martha was labeled as “worried” about too many things. It is because of her worry she is seen as anxious and unable to even enjoy her guest. Luke 10:38-42 reminds us that we are valued and important. Jesus also reminds us that we do not have to worry. Martha had made choices as a hostess, regarding how she wanted to serve her guest. She may have become unsettled when she realized it was too much for her to handle alone.

Most people can recognize that there may be some evidence of sibling rivalry going on in this story. It is difficult to say that this is in fact the case; however, most siblings have occasion to become jealous of one another. When this happens they may take turns reporting on the other sibling. There may also be some bickering back and forth before going to the parent. One sibling may feel that the other is getting too much attention from one of their parents. This may, in fact, be true on some occasions. Many parents can resonate with the need to mediate when problems arise between their children.

If it is a fact that one child in the family may be getting more attention than the other, there is usually a reason. One of the children may be ill or have a disability. Thus the need for attention is necessary for appropriately parenting the child. The reason may be a valid one. A child may misinterpret or misunderstand the reason. If a child feels that he or she is not receiving attention or is getting less attention from the parent then the child feels neglected. Martha may feel that the relationship that she and her siblings have with Jesus is so close that he is viewed as an older sibling or even a parent figure.

Martha may also see Jesus as wise. The fact that he is knowledgeable about so many things may have prompt Martha to seek counsel and guidance from him. Travelers in those days were often seen as more knowledgeable because of their opportunities to

learn from their travel. If one takes this into account for Mary's action, then what she did may seem appropriate. We can only speculate, as there is a limited amount of information in this passage.

On the other hand, Mary's behavior can also be seen as selfish. Was she sitting at the feet of Jesus for her own selfish reasons, or was she distracted by his charm? We do not know if Mary would agree that she was being selfish in not helping her sister. She remained silent during the interchange. We do need to remember that she was not just sitting there listening. She later anointed the feet of Jesus with oil, according to the passage found in John 12:3. It can serve as a reminder that weary travelers needed their feet washed. Although it is not mentioned in the Luke passage, one could assume that it was done. Mary would then be the most likely one to do it.

Since Mary washed the feet of Jesus, she was not just sitting there. The washing of feet was a very important part of offering hospitality. Although the passage does not speak again about the disciples, they needed their feet washed also. Sometimes, we all need to slow down and attend to what one of my teachers calls "living in the moment." The time is ripe or right for that teachable moment. If we are not ready to receive it, then the opportunity is lost: "Mary was feeding her spiritual needs."<sup>32</sup>

This Luke passage describes the house as belonging to Martha. This may be unusual for a woman. Most likely, the home was left to her by her husband and Martha is a widow. Having her own house gives status to Martha within the community. Martha was probably used to having others work for or with her because of her status. We then

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<sup>32</sup> Herbert Lockyer, *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary: An Authoritative One-Volume Reference Work On the Bible, with Full-Color Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1986), 683.

must question if Mary lived there also? If she does not then she is also a visitor. A visitor is generally not expected to come and be put to work. It was probably a cultural norm and expectation in biblical history that a woman serves guests and attends to preparations and details in the kitchen. It may also have been the expectation that female guests help in the kitchen also.

We are accepting that Mary and Martha are sisters. The relationship between siblings is often complicated and conflicted. Sibling rivalry likely comes into play. Older siblings have been known to be bossy. The relationship between Mary and Martha was possibly no different. In order to put the situation in context, we must examine why Martha expected Mary to help her. This leaves one to wonder if Mary has always followed Martha's lead or if this situation was an exception.

The reader naturally assumes that Mary is being irresponsible if one reads the passage in the context of the culture. It is suggested that Martha wants to be an attentive and a good hostess. Taking charge may be a typical role of the hosting homeowner. It is also the typical behavior of an older sibling.

Most women have been in the role of hostess with guests in the house. Preparation for the guests usually begins long before their arrival. In today's world, most travelers have the option of staying in a hotel but still welcome a meal or two at someone's home. Most travelers in those days expected to be offered hospitality in someone's home as they traveled. Hospitality usually included a meal and somewhere to sleep for the night. The traveler often told stories about their travels. Those in the household of the hostess benefitted, as books and television or internet were not available. The travelers were their connection to the world. This closely resembles what

we now call “southern hospitality”: “The provision of hospitality was a social requirement in their culture.”<sup>33</sup> To be able and willing to provide hospitality was held with esteem and high regards.

Many women with a guest in the home would likely take the role of Martha. The role of hostess is just one of the many roles that women find themselves in. This is a familiar scene for women today. There is an unwritten social rule observed today that any women in the home would immediately go to the kitchen to lend a hand with the preparations. If we are to read the scripture in that context, it can be understood that Martha was upset with Mary: “Martha thought Mary’s style of serving was inferior to hers.”<sup>34</sup> Again, “Martha was worried about details . . . making everyone around her uncomfortable.”<sup>35</sup> Martha chose to turn to Jesus, to complain. Jesus is not only a guest, but also an honored guest. This makes her action an insult. It was her idea to extend the invitation. One would think that she was prepared to provide what was needed for her guest. If this is her home and she is in charge, then why is she troubling her guest with the details of hosting?

In this passage Martha can be presented as the practical one, until she complains to Jesus.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that she is surprised and hurt by the response she received. We are reminded that it was Martha who extended the invitation. In doing so, one would think

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<sup>33</sup> *The Life Application Study Bible*, 1825.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible*, 86.

that she was prepared to provide what was needed for her guest. If this is her home and she is in charge then why is she troubling her guest with the details of hosting?

Martha can also be seen in this passage as envious and jealous. Perhaps she wanted to have the opportunity to sit at the feet of Jesus and just enjoy his company. Martha may have been seeking attention from Jesus, as being in the kitchen she was not receiving any. Martha may have been attempting to gain attention from Jesus as the one being more attentive to his needs.

It seldom comes to question where their brother Lazarus is. If he was there, why was he not asked by Martha to discipline his sister Mary? If he is present, why did he not speak to the issue without being asked? Placing the responsibility on Jesus to speak to the issue suggests to this author that Martha was placing Jesus in a role as a family member instead of a close friend or honored guest.

The text immediately shifts away from the other disciples to Jesus being the one invited to the home of Martha. If they are there are they being served? If they are not there, where are they? If they are there, it is likely that there was even more work to be done.

“Mary and Martha . . . both loved Jesus” and it was their desire to serve him.<sup>37</sup> Martha was irritated with her sister and was attempting to take control of the situation. Taking charge was not unusual, as she was the oldest sister.<sup>38</sup> It is an interesting observation that Mary never said a word. One can imagine that Mary either did not care,

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<sup>37</sup> *The Life Application Study Bible*, 1824.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1825.



was irritated by Martha's comment, or even chose to ignore her sister. The usual expected response should have been to rebuke Mary for not doing what was expected of her.

It would not have been unusual for Martha to have just ordered her sister to come to help her in the kitchen. As the older sister, Martha had the authority to do that. Mary as the younger sister would have been obliged to follow the directive of her sister. We can only guess or imagine that Mary received a scolding and or punishment after the guest left.

If we look at the relationship between Mary and Martha, we see the contrast in personality. Martha's take-charge spirit could easily have disempowered Mary's quieter spirit, which was open to receiving all she could from the teachings of Jesus. Jesus saw value in Mary's use of time and made it clear that spending time listening to him should not be taken from her.

Martha was taking the lead to be hospitable but had made an assumption about what she needed to do at that time. She was leading, but Mary was following. A tired and weary traveler may need rest and relaxation before food. Martha's attempt to serve was becoming busywork!<sup>39</sup> Busywork does not necessarily equate to being of service to God. Sometimes what is needed is to stop and evaluate what is needed.

The passage of scripture in Luke is very short. Although it is short, it offers insight into the prevailing attitudes and values of that biblical era about the role and expectation of women. It also gives us a glimpse of the dynamics that occur between women. Attempts to exegete the text leave the reader with more questions than answers.

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<sup>39</sup> *The Life Application Study Bible*, 1825.

This author was left wondering after Jesus spoke if Martha fully understood what Jesus said to her. Did she think he rebuked her? What did she do after he spoke to her? Did she return to her work or did she rethink about what she said and apologize? Did she make other plans for the meal and come to sit at the feet of Jesus with her sister? Did she negotiate with Mary to help her finish what she started, so that they both could enjoy their guest? We do not know how old either of the women was. Could it be possible that Mary was so young she had not fully grasped the understanding of what good hospitality meant in their culture? There are many possibilities.

An important lesson that, the author feels, needs to be offered here is that what we think about and say about others matters. A careless word spoken about or to another woman can be very harmful and hurtful. It is also a double-edged sword. It can be harmful. Some women need to be reminded that you cannot build yourself up by putting others down or being a gossip. Who wants to be around someone who is always negative or puts others down?

Women can certainly locate themselves in the story of Mary and Martha. If so, it must be emphatically realized how much it hurts and how devastating it can be to be disrespected or to have others put us down. As women, we probably recognize ourselves as having been on both sides of the fence. We have been the one to spread negativism about another woman and we have been the recipient, also.

When we look closely at either of these texts (in Ruth or Luke) we are able to see that none of the women are perfect. Each of them had faults. Additionally, they each had redeeming qualities. Ruth was willing to forsake her own people and her personal needs to follow and care for her mother-in-law. Ruth was willing to lead a life as an outcast in a

foreign land and follow the instruction of a woman who did not seem to appreciate what she was doing for her. Her devotion eventually paid off. Naomi was so focused on her own concerns that she did not seem to appreciate Ruth's loyalty to her. The wisdom gained from her long life was eventually used to secure a better life for both of them. Martha appeared to become jealous of or angry with her sister and sought to take control of things. Mary became so preoccupied with listening to Jesus, she did not ask or acknowledge that her sister may need her help with the preparations for their guest.

How can we as leaders engage these scriptures contextually to bring healing and supportive pastoral care to women? As said earlier in this writing, we must be able to find methods of telling the story and engaging the text in positive ways that help women locate themselves in the text. When women are hurting, they are not helped by a generic rendering of the text that does little to empower them and build their self-esteem. A generic rendering of a text does not wipe away the tears women shed nor is it an effective healing balm for their suffering. The message received by women in pain is that they do not matter and that their pain is not real. We are talking about spiritual and emotional pain. This will certainly leave women feeling vulnerable and helpless.

Many women accept the helpless role and feel inadequate to help themselves. They too often succumb to the negative talk in the church (and society) that brainwashes them into thinking they do not deserve better and are unworthy. Just like Naomi in our earlier text, they beat themselves up when they do not meet expectation of society. They are duped into believing that their situation is their fault. The feeling of shame or guilt over their situation is evidence of their acceptance of the expectations of society. Like Martha we then begin to "police" each other into following the rules as well. The

“policing” of each other fuels a poor relationship between women. It also makes it difficult for women to work together and collaborate with each other.

In order to understand the impact of a sermon that disempowers women, we can inquire how safe a woman would feel approaching her pastor to discuss something that deeply troubles her. If she only hears negative messages she would not want to put herself in a vulnerable position by sharing her intimate personal hurts. A woman who has lost a loved one may not be comfortable approaching the pastor for support if the pastor has not shown sympathy to the plight of Ruth and Naomi. A woman who is experiencing difficulty in relationship with a mother-in-law will probably find comfort in the story of Ruth and Naomi if it is lifted up in a positive way. There are positive stories in the Bible about women, but somehow many of those stories are absent from sermons or teachings.

The choice for the exegesis of both the Ruth and the Luke text was because they were identifiable by women as stories that relate to everyday life. When used in a sermon, the sermon can lift up social concerns, reaching people where they are: “The people who position themselves in the pews of this nation’s churches Sunday after Sunday are confronted daily with the harsh realities of a world spinning rapidly and radically out of control.”<sup>40</sup> The needs and concerns of women are part of those realities. It has become more apparent in this day that when women are hurting there is an impact on others. This is true if she is a parent and or caretaker. Carolyn Ann Knight reminds us, “In the face of the realities of homelessness, high unemployment and underemployment, a burgeoning violent crime rate, the resurgence of racism and sexism . . . churchgoers need to hear

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<sup>40</sup> Carolyn Ann Knight, “Linking Text with Context” (DMin thesis, United Theological Seminary, 1996), viii.

sermons that assure them that God is involved specifically in the day-to-day activities of humankind.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to these concerns, women encounter a host of other concerns that permeate every inch of their lives including domestic violence, sexual harassment and other challenges that put them in the margins of society.

Female and male leaders need to open themselves to being approachable. This can be accomplished by preaching, teaching, counseling and modeling in ways that empower and enable. Leaders must model openness, sensitivity and empathy in their interpreting the scripture. Female leaders can also build and equip themselves with solid skills in pastoral care. Pastoral care can then become the foundation for leadership, a healing balm that equips, empowers and enables.

The ability to help women locate themselves in the biblical text cannot be overemphasized. It is crucial. Even though women have gained status over time, there is little room to become too comfortable with the status quo. We still live in a male-dominated society, church and world. The suppression of being “kept in our place” is experienced in the pulpit as well as the pew. The “stained glass ceiling” in the church may be beautiful to look at, but it is oppressive for women to live under. This kind of situation leaves women feeling disrespected and disempowered.

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<sup>41</sup> Knight, “Linking Text with Context,” viiii.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The doctoral research project will focus on improving the response of leaders in church in addressing the pastoral care needs of victimized and abused women because there is a need for support and empowerment of women in the church. In the early church, women were not viewed as significant contributors. Traditionally, their needs were placed on the back burner or not addressed at all. Since women have been traditionally seen as weak and unimportant they have been mistreated due to the prevailing patriarchal and sexist attitudes. Therefore, there is a need to look closely at the historical treatment of women, the attitudes and the beliefs and practices that have kept them on the margins of society. These oppressive attitudes affect their daily lives; it impacts them psychologically, physically and spiritually. It takes away their voice to speak for their needs and places limitations on them serving in positions of leadership and having their pastoral needs met.

A history of women in early religious history provided. Most of the research gave limited information about the roles of women as leaders in the church. It is possible that the limited view is presented because we historically lived and continue to live in a patriarchal society. Although many attitudes have changed, patriarchal attitudes continue

to exist; therefore, careful examination of the present status of the role of women in leadership is needed to keep the forward momentum.

As a part of Disciple of Christ history, in this paper a panoramic view of the founding history of the denomination will be presented. An examination of the prevailing thoughts regarding the roles of women in historic context will discuss denominational history up to the present. The will also discuss the attitudes, beliefs and values of the denomination. Historical information of other denominations and ministries will be interspersed throughout this work if it impacts the work of her doctoral project. This will be done in accordance with the significance that the author places the information as it relates to her doctoral project.

A brief discussion of the collaborative efforts between various denominations with the Disciples is present. Specific attention will be given to the history and present ministries that are shared between Disciples of Christ and other denominations. The author contends that there is a strong need for women in church leadership to work together to undergird and empower each other. Finally the author will end this writing on the historical roles of women bringing us through history up to the present.

In 1996 Vashti M. McKenzie published a ground-breaking book, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry*. Although McKenzie's book focuses specifically on leadership, it parallels the plight of women as they are marginalized and oppressed in every arena of life. The author recalls that McKenzie's book took the religious community by storm. Her books were sold out and so was every one of her lectures. With the publication of this book came a paradigm shift and an amazing transformation of deliverance for women of color, in specific, and all

women in general. She boldly spoke on issues of gender and sexism. She dared to question why women remained oppressed in the church and gave concrete suggestions as to what was needed for women to become effective leaders.

McKenzie writes, “The tapestry of female leadership is woven with threads centuries old. A glimpse of the historical threads of female leadership in Greek, Roman and Jewish societies reminds us that women exercised leadership behaviors and responsibilities in spite of structures of oppression, silence and seclusion. Women did not have the privilege of leadership training and preparation.”<sup>1</sup> She further states, “[M]an societies relegate women to the fringes of community life. Their roles were defined, for the most part, along a patriarchal system and were limited to childbearing and housekeeping responsibilities. Women were treated in some traditions as property, to be counted along with the acres of land, houses and cattle. This is certainly true of ancient Jewish society.”<sup>2</sup>

The author became fascinated during the research process as she encountered glimpses of women creatively overcoming obstacles and situations in history and in the present. Great feats would be accomplished as they came together and prayerfully set about the task of accomplishing their goals. Over the years, stories have been published of how groups of women have shut down businesses that brought negative consequences to their community or had products banned from the market that were harmful to their families. These feats included selling eggs and baked goods to support the church, raise

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<sup>1</sup> Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle: Leadership Development For African American Women In Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



school tuition or purchase the freedom of enslaved loved ones. Another example is the victory of women using their collective efforts to shut down saloons and double church attendance in 1874 in the cities of Cincinnati, Chicago and New York.<sup>3</sup>

No one should be able to deny the contributions that women have made through the years, but it is done even today: “History often interprets women as being the weaker sex or even the lesser sex.”<sup>4</sup> One should not deny the leadership skills of women when there is concrete evidence of their value. Hospitals, charitable organizations and religious institutions in many of the mainland denominations were founded by women. The Salvation Army is one of those organization in which controversy over the founder exists. Sometimes Catherine Booth and her husband, William, are credited with the founding of the organization. Sometimes William is credited as founder and Catherine Booth as “[t]he army mother.”<sup>5</sup>

Many women took the backseat with the husband taking the lead in business ventures: “Domesticity was an essential feature of the ideal woman. Her sphere was the home where she reigned as queen over a kingdom. It was carefully distinguished from the male world of politics and business.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, gen. eds. *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), 61.

<sup>4</sup> McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Salvog.org, “Founders William and Catherine Booth,” accessed December 7, 2013, <http://salvos.org.au/about-us/our-history/william-and-catherine-booth.php>.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women In Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986), 93.

It is evident in church history records in the detailed records of the pastors who served the congregation. Just like the history records of many congregations, information about the wives and families of the pastors is non-existent. A conscious choice to make a generalized statement is being made here because it is such a commonly accepted pattern of recording church history. In the very early church history, women and children were not even counted as members. An example of this is provided in the Mark 6 passage which records that five loaves of bread and two fish were distributed among the people to feed them. However, Mark 6:44 counts only the number of men who were fed.

There is no mention of the women and children. These beliefs and practices are well stated by Vashti McKenzie: “The problem of examining these historical threads is the use and recovery of sources. Many of them were recorded by males displaying biases typical of their society.”<sup>7</sup> The wife often played a key role at home and in the church. In many instances, the pastor is able to do all he does because of the support of the wife. Her skills and talents are often utilized (then and now) in the education department, in the music ministry or on the hospitality committee. The role assigned to the wife by the congregation is usually by default (according to what the congregation believes is her role) rather than choice. It is expected that if the wife is not musically gifted, she must be able to cook well and/or teach or take a prominent role in the women’s program. She is put in a leadership role but without title or respect. If her role is so important then why is it left out of church history?

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<sup>7</sup> McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle*, 1.

Women have not historically taken positions of leadership in parish ministry. Through the years, women have been able to move into a variety of positions in the church including parish ministry. They still, however, face many road blocks. Ironically, the road blocks are just as much from women as from men. Still, “[s]ince the 1960s women have made great strides toward a place for themselves in the institutional churches and the community of biblical scholars and theologians.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, “[b]roadly speaking, liberationist churches and denominations are more open to female pastors. They tend to view social justice issues as a centerpiece of their understanding, interpretation, and application of scripture. Their theology, at least in theory includes freedom from gender bias.”<sup>9</sup>

The author’s present context for ministry is at a congregation going through a period of transition, also known as an interim period. During the interim period a number of changes are taking place, and it might be an ideal time for a congregation to explore congregational attitudes toward calling a woman as pastor. The calling of a woman as an interim gives them an opportunity to experience the leadership of a female minister for a short period of time.

The interim period may also provide focus on the pastoral care needs of any congregation. Since women make up a majority of the membership, there are specific needs to be addressed, such as the misguided beliefs and values that lead women to turn

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<sup>8</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Christine A. Smith, *Beyond the Stained Glass Ceiling: Equipping and Encouraging Female Pastors* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2013), 20.

on each other as they scramble for recognition and power. In this instance, the gossiping and backbiting cause the members to do more fighting among themselves than addressing the needs for preparing themselves to receive new leadership.

Interim ministry has become an acceptable practice in the last decade that requires a unique set of skills from a pastor: “Intentional interim leadership requires adaptability and flexibility.”<sup>10</sup> Women have traditionally and historically been very flexible and adaptable due to the complexity of the roles they juggle. The author did not find any gender statistics on the call to this type ministry. Although gender statistics on the call to ministry is not widely researched, both men and women are called. Historically, interim ministry had a casual beginning, with retiring pastors filling in until a permanent pastor was called.<sup>11</sup> Interim work has become a practice as more pastors change congregations several times in the life of their ministry.

The average minister has held a paid job in ministry for nineteen years and has spent an average of 15.6 of those years as a senior pastor of one or more churches. The average minister has been the senior pastor of his or her current church for 7.7 years. Ministers at larger churches tended to have a longer tenure—an average of 8.7 years in their current position, compared to 7.2 years among small churches.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paul N. Swingen, *The Interim Minister: A Special Calling* (Bethesda MD: Alban Institute, 1998), 55.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Grey Matter Research and Consulting, “Study Shows Why Protestant Clergy Change Jobs – Promotions are a More Common Cause than God’s Call,” accessed November 25, 2013, [http://greymatterresearch.com/index\\_files/Job\\_Changes.htm](http://greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Job_Changes.htm).

It is numbers like these that give rationale for the need for transitional ministry. When a pastor leaves a congregation, the individuals go through a mourning period, very similar to the stages of grief. Many denominations have made it a common practice to have the congregation go through an interim period to prepare itself to receive a new pastor.

During the interim or transitional period the congregation is able to do activities that help them to prepare to move forward. The congregation can view where they have been and who they were in the past, who they are now as a congregation and who they are becoming and what directions they want to go in the future. The largest and most respected and accepted organization acknowledged by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is The Interim Ministry Network. It has provided health and wellness support for over three decades.<sup>13</sup>

The Interim Ministry Network notes that there are some serious issues that need to be considered during the interim period that are critical to the health of the congregation.<sup>14</sup> Transitional congregational issues may be divided into five critical areas that result in disconnection from their history, the lack of identity that fits their current circumstances, the need for some shifts in church leadership, weakened denominational links and the lack of a commitment to a new future or redefined purpose.

The Interim Ministry Network provides year-round training classes with these areas in mind. The training represents the latest expression of IMN's ongoing

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<sup>13</sup> The Interim Ministry Network, "Welcome to IMN," accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.imnedu.org>.

<sup>14</sup> The Interim Ministry Network, "The Fundamentals of Transitional Ministry: The Work of the Leader," accessed November 15, 2013, [www.imnedu.org/index.php?p=1\\_9\\_Fundamentals-of-Transitional-Ministry](http://www.imnedu.org/index.php?p=1_9_Fundamentals-of-Transitional-Ministry).

commitment to educating clergy and others about the work of the leader during transitional times and most especially the transition that occurs when an incumbent cleric leaves a congregation.<sup>15</sup>

There are five developmental tasks to be accomplished during the interim ministry period. The first task is to come to terms with church history by knowing and accepting the past. The second task is the discovering of a new identity as God opens us to who we are now as a congregation. The third task is to be open to shifts of power among the leadership of the church. The fourth task is rethinking the linkages with denominational structures and resources. The final task is to make a commitment to new leadership and a new future. These tasks are a major agenda of a congregation during the interim ministry period.

There are several terms and titles used to refer to the minister who is serving as an Interim Minister, which include Interim Pastor, Interim Minister, Intentional Interim, Interim Specialist and Professional Transitional Specialist. The various titles seem to have different meaning to different congregations, denominations and networks. Sometimes all that is expected is that the minister preaches on Sunday. There is general agreement, though, that the person in this role is professionally trained. It is also generally agreed that the minimum term is six months to a year and that the minister in this position will not (generally) be a candidate for the settled or permanent pastor position. The author's understanding is that there is great emphasis placed on the fact that the interim must remember that there is separate work the interim does from the church.

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<sup>15</sup> The Interim Ministry Network, "Church Consultant and Facilitator Training," accessed November 13, 2013, <http://imnedu.org/?s=training>.

The church members must do the work to take advantage of this period of time to actively engage in the task of preparation and change.

If a congregation fails to properly prepare for a new pastor, then the new pastor becomes an “unintentional interim minister.” This means that he or she will leave prematurely out of the frustration and chaos which surfaces as they try to do ministry. Congregations that have thoroughly and thoughtfully done the work of preparation know what they need and want from a new pastor.

When one experiences a call to ministry, it is a call and change for the minister and the spouse as well as the family. The spouse plays a very important leadership role in the mate’s ministry. Each of their lives is forever changed. There is work to do to prepare for that change. However, the only expected person to make the change is the one who is called. This leaves the spouse (who is traditionally a female) and their children to grapple with that change as best they can. Where is the support for the spouse who is the usually “the glue” who holds the family together?

Psychologists believe that change and transition elicit anxiety and stress. Interim ministry, because it is transitional, elicits anxiety for everyone. This factor creates the need for an experienced minister with training in interim work.

The present context for ministry for the author is a congregation located in Ohio. The congregation has a long history of strong leadership of educated clergy. The congregational history includes leadership of males and females. Within the congregation, females have held positions such as elder, chair of the board and trustee. The congregation has hired a female as interim minister. The most recent full-time pastor (now retired) was a female.

Disciples as a denomination began to make the shift to inclusion of women on the deacon board in the late 1970s. There were two separate orders of deaconess and deacons that merged into one diaconate. There were women appointed to the elder board during this time period. Additionally, women were invited to speak in the main church service on occasions other than Women's and Mother's Day.

From 1978 to the present, women have entered MDiv programs in increasing numbers; however, those numbers are still not parallel with those of men.<sup>16</sup> An even closer look at the history of women in seminary gives us a more comprehensive picture of the reason for the changes:

Several factors account for the increase in proportion of women in seminary. First, social attitudes have shifted favoring openness for women entering all professions, including divinity, the former "queen of professions." In the last fifty years, society has been generally more open to women entering professions formerly filled predominantly or solely by men.

Secondly, this shift led Protestant denominations in the 1970's to make important decisions. They could either make changes in their canons so that women could be ordained for the first time (i.e. the Episcopal Church and denominations now part of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) or establish national programs to assist women interested in becoming clergy to obtain the needed credentials and find positions (i.e. mainline denominations such as ABC, Disciples, UCC, United Methodist, the Presbyterian Church).

Finally, secularization in society has affected the central importance of church organizations. This has lessened the attractiveness of clergy as a career choice particularly in the liberal mainline Protestant denominations that have valued advanced graduate degrees for their clergy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hartford Institute for Religious Research, "Are more or less women entering seminaries today?" accessed December 6, 2013, [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick\\_question44.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question44.html).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is considered a mainline protestant denomination. The roots of the denomination can be traced to the Presbyterian Church. A movement toward separation began with Presbyterian ministers Barton Warren Stone, Thomas Campbell and Alexander Campbell (father and son). They had difficulty embracing what they considered very rigid practices in the Presbyterian Church. They began their protest in separate movements with specific concerns. Stone began his movement in Kentucky. The Campbells began their movement in a part of Pennsylvania and what is now West Virginia. They eventually merged their efforts. Thus the merged name of their movement became “The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).” The name Christians, “adopted by Stone's movement, represented what he felt to be a shedding of denominational labels in favor of a scriptural and inclusive term. Campbell had similar reasons for settling on ‘Disciples of Christ’ but he felt the term ‘Disciples’ less presumptuous than ‘Christians.’”<sup>18</sup>

The Disciples of Christ Historical Society provided descriptive information regarding the denomination. The information indicated that the “churches fall into the category of Protestant free-church. That is, individual congregations are seen as the pinnacle of church expression, are independent/autonomous organizations, and advocate the separation of church and state.”<sup>19</sup> Further, the Historical Society went on to characterize churches by focusing “on New Testament teaching, shared governance

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<sup>18</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, “History of the Disciples,” accessed November 25, 2013, <http://disciples.org/our-identity/history-of-the-disciples/>.

<sup>19</sup> Disciples of Christ Historical Society, “A Brief History of the Stone-Campbell Tradition,” accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.discipleshistory.org/history/brief-history-stone-campbell-tradition>.

between clergy and laity, baptism by immersion, ecumenism, and the regular celebration of communion during worship.”<sup>20</sup>

A significant change occurred for the Disciples in the year 2005, when the first female president of the denomination was elected and installed. As General Minister and President (GMP), she is general pastor of the 700,000-member denomination, responsible for representing the wholeness of the church, for reconciling differences and for helping the church retain its clarity of mission and identity.<sup>21</sup> She is married and her husband is a minister. He serves the denomination as a seminary professor. According to her biography she takes a Sabbath day once a week, which is taken seriously. This expression of self-care is a great model for clergywomen. The GMP is an inspiration to the female clergy of the denomination.

There is little attention and tracking in history of the movement of women into leadership positions of the denomination. There was a time when women were not allowed to speak, preach or pray publicly. Historical information is not as readily available about the roles that women played in religious history. However, there is some evidence that women played very significant roles in the Stone-Campbell movement. For example, “A critical factor in the growth of women’s leadership among Stone-Campbell’s Christians, as in other Protestant traditions, was the development of national women’s societies.”<sup>22</sup> Additionally, in 1874 a new chapter in the role of women in the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, “Dr. Watkins’ Biography,” accessed November 15, 2013, <http://disciples.org/ogmp/dr-watkins-biography/>.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 61.

Stone-Campbell Movement began that created the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Stone-Campbell Movement's Christian Women's Board of Mission (CWBM).<sup>23</sup> Another significant event took place in 1886, when women in St. Louis organized the National Benevolent Association (NBA) to care for widows and orphans.

This growth was sparked by a grassroots movement in which women in Ohio organized themselves against saloons and alcohol sales during the winter of 1873-1874. During this time church attendance doubled "in over 250 towns and villages in Ohio. Never before had women joined in public action met with such success."<sup>24</sup> It was out of this movement that a national convention was held in Cleveland, Ohio, in November of 1874. The result was the founding of WCTU.

The organization of WCTU and CWBM represented a significant shift in conventional wisdom regarding women's roles. What historians label "the cult of true womanhood" or the "cult of domesticity" had dominated upper and middle class American thought since the 1820s, especially in the more industrialized North. . . . Women—seen as humble, pious, submissive, and meek—were the natural protectors of the home, nurturers of children, and pillars of the church, all essential but non-public functions.<sup>25</sup>

However, one could argue that there are elements of untruth to this statement. The argument of truth resides with these pioneering women, who were not meek or weak, due to their many accomplishments in the church and the home. It was the effort of the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 61.

women that kept the church going in many instances. Unfortunately, many people today still hold some of these beliefs about women's abilities.

Yet Alexander Campbell, a founding pioneer of the Disciples, followed the teachings 1 Tim. 2:8-12 which states, "I suffer not woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man."<sup>26</sup> He asserted his position publicly. His wife, Selina Huntington Bakewell Campbell, subscribed to his beliefs. After his death she continued to carry out his beliefs and values, writing letters and articles.<sup>27</sup>

Many leaders endorsed the same beliefs. However, some leaders were outwardly opposed, such as "the editor of the Christian Standard, Isaac Errett."<sup>28</sup> Others such as "editor Elijah Goodwin went even further by claiming that under certain conditions women could preach."<sup>29</sup>

The uphill battle for women's right to preach, speak in public or hold public office was not unique to the Disciples. Other denominations such as the Presbyterians and United Methodist had similar issues. In the Presbyterian Church, Elizabeth Howell Verdesi gives testimony in her book based on her doctoral thesis, *In But Still Out*. She writes, "I felt anger, bitterness, and hurt because I could not even be considered being a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, Foster, and Blowers, *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, 61.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 62.

minister of my church.”<sup>30</sup> In the Methodist Church, in 1787, John Wesley authorized Sarah Mallet to preach.<sup>31</sup>

The Disciples have a long heritage of openness to other Christian traditions in that they came into existence as sort of a nineteenth century protest movement against denominational exclusiveness. At the local level and beyond, Disciples are frequently involved in cooperative and ecumenical work.<sup>32</sup> In 1910, the Disciples established the Council on Christian Unity, the first denomination in the world to have an organization devoted to the pursuit of Christian unity. Disciples helped organize the National and World Councils of Churches.<sup>33</sup>

The tradition of working in partnership has continued through the years. The author recalls working with other denominations on an ecumenical partnership project, “Families 2000.” The project provided experience and opportunity to work and collaborate with others outside of the denomination.

Disciples have given leadership to the establishment of a new ecumenical venture in the U.S. called Christian Churches Together (CCT) that brings together Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Evangelicals and Pentecostal Christians. The Rev. Dr. Richard L. Hamm, former General Minister and President, was CCT's first full-time executive. In

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Howell Verdesi, *In But Still Out: Women in the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 16.

<sup>31</sup> United Methodist News Service, “Time Line of Women in Methodism—The United Methodist Church,” Accessed November 25, 2013, <http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=1wL4KnN1LtH&b=5765535&ct=8116849>.

<sup>32</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, “History of the Disciples.”

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

1989, the Disciples and the United Church of Christ declared, "a relationship of full communion now exists between our two churches." The ecumenical partnership rests on five pillars of acceptance and cooperation: a common confession of Christ; mutual recognition of members; common celebration of the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion; mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordained ministries; and common commitment to mission. Joint work between the Disciples' Division of Overseas Ministries and the UCC's Wider Church Ministries (formerly known as United Church Board for World Ministries) dates from 1967. World mission for both churches is now carried out by the Common Global Ministries Board, established in 1995. Approximately 150 persons hold overseas appointments in forty-four countries on the churches' behalf.<sup>34</sup>

Historically they have always been open to collaboration and partnerships. The goal of those collaborations has generally resulted in pooling resources for improved benefits and outcomes for those being served. This process works well on a small and large scale. Opportunity to collaborate on ministry projects should be a common goal for women in leadership also.

The author agrees that:

Ongoing patterns of passive hostility persist against women clergy, and without broader information and supportive networks some clergy women identify their problems as personal failures, rather than the limitations of the social or institutional systems in which they are located. The study suggests that if clergy women can overcome the isolation created by the personalization of their "failures," and gain an understanding that their problems are systemic rather than individual or situational, they may be able to mobilize and make significant new

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<sup>34</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, "History of the Disciples."

contributions to the churches and their ministries by expanding definitions of ordained ministry and—literally—taking the church into the world.<sup>35</sup>

In general there are and will continue to be closed doors and negative attitudes about women and female leadership. Women continuing to work together supporting each other will continue to be an important factor in their success. We must continue to keep developing “arenas that facilitate introducing female leadership into congregations, chaplaincies, ministries, and denominational positions.”<sup>36</sup> This will demonstrate that women are valued members of the denomination and honor their gifts and talents.

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<sup>35</sup> Hartford Institute for Religious Research, “*Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*: an abstract of the study,” accessed December 6, 2013, [http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/clergywomen\\_abstract.html#the\\_future](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/clergywomen_abstract.html#the_future).

<sup>36</sup> McKenzie, *Not Without A Struggle*, 117.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

In this theological foundations paper, the author will express the theological viewpoints by utilizing Biblical, Practical and Liberation theologies. The various doctrines of church ministry, preaching, teaching, worship and sacraments, will be connected to articulate the theological beliefs. The method will explore the connections of various themes and issues of the project in her reflection of the theology. Thoughts and reflections of historical and contemporary theologians will be utilized.

There are three contemporary theologians whom the author feels greatly influenced her in ministry. These theologians have also informed her in choosing the direction for her doctoral project. The theologians are Delores Carpenter, Julia Speller and Edward P. Wimberly. Delores Carpenter is a Professor of Religious Education at Howard University School of Divinity and is ordained clergy in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Julia Speller serves as Associate Professor of American Religious History and Culture at Chicago Theological Seminary. Edward P. Wimberly is the Jarena Lee Professor of Pastoral Care at the Interdenominational Theological Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia.

The author's doctoral project will focus specifically on women in leadership positioning themselves to join forces with other church leaders to specifically address the



pastoral care needs of women. The project will include a closer look at the gender justice issues of society that sanctions sexism, misogyny and patriarchal practices.<sup>1</sup> This author contends that there continues to be an enormous amount of power, control and devaluation of women within society and our communities of faith, consequently leading to violence, disrespect, abuse and oppression of women. “To call for a deep . . . transformation of patriarchy is not an attack on men individually or collectively. Patriarchy is a kind of society, a system of domination in which we all participate. It is a pervasive social, political, and economic phenomenon, expressed in personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural ways.”<sup>2</sup> This author asserts that it is imperative that the church continues to address and pursue this sensitive issue of justice.

This author believes that females were (and still are) very vulnerable to the unforgiving misogyny of sexist and patriarchal beliefs of our society. Many women have experiences of physical and mental abuse, which create situations of trauma that leave scars that change the course of their lives forever. These experiences are part of the common threads that are woven into the lives of most women. This has affected how women are treated throughout their lives. There is no escape, not even in the church. Women have been continually subjected to hearing negative interpretations of women in the Bible, even in this day. This truth remains, even with the liberation theologies of

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<sup>1</sup> Sally N. MacNichol, “Kin’dom Come: Houses of Worship and Gender Justice in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Learning to Lead: Lessons in Leadership for People of Faith*, ed. Willard W. C. Ashley, Sr. (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013), 241.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

feminist and womanist protest. Although there are common threads that impact how they are treated, many women unknowingly participate by reinforcing the mistreatment.

The objective of the project is to empower and support women. It is necessary to seek ways to provide pastoral care, spiritual care and compassion to other women. This will provide opportunity for healing, wholeness, bonding and empowerment. Providing these resources to women in leadership can lead the way to spiritual freedom to actively engage in their specific call, ministry and purpose.

Therefore, the question becomes, what is needed for women to survive and thrive, with resiliency in the face of adversity and controversy? Can female leaders in the church position themselves to meet these needs? This task can be accomplished when church leadership begins to intentionally and consistently address this issue by asking and seeking answers to these questions instead of accepting this as status quo. Change happens when one takes the courage to push beyond the boundaries that are imposed on them.

In exploring the theological perspective, it is shaped at birth. A newborn baby sees him or herself as the center of their world. They see everything and everyone around them as being present to meet their needs. As a young child, the author of course had no understanding or awareness of things that were happening at that time. As an adult she has the capacity to reflect back with the ability to understand how early experiences have impacted and shaped her life and her worldview.

The words of Karl Barth resonate with this author as he stated, “Theology does not happen in a vacuum.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, theology has been shaped and formed by many experiences throughout life. It is the core of who we become and has informed how the script of life has unfolded.

The author contends that how and by whom a person is introduced to the faith matters in the formation of their theology. It matters because they share the beliefs and worldview of key people in their lives. This author was introduced to the faith by her paternal grandparents. How she was to live out her Christian life was reinforced by her parents. Simple morals, such as we must love and respect others as Jesus loved us, were taught by her parents. Although she was never able to understand why she had to love and respect everyone, including those who hurt her and the people she loved, she did what she was told. She followed these expectations out of respect and obedience to her parents. This was the Christian thing to do, she was told. These principles became part of her core theological beliefs.

This author believes that there are foundations and core beliefs one has, but theology continues to be formed and changed throughout life. This depends on the life experiences and circumstances she has encountered. Some of these life experiences, whether good or bad, are beyond her control. Some of the things she had no control over include the time and place of her birth, her parents, her ethnicity and her culture.

Some situations or circumstances have a direct affect and some things have a peripheral or indirect effect. The political and racial climate of the world around her are

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *The Nature and Task of Theology*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publisher, 2001), 45.

examples. As an African American, these factors impacted where she was able to live and what school she went to. It even affected the economic status of her family. These factors even affected where she went to church. Did these factors impact her theology? Yes, they did!

Growing up there were many confusing signals and messages she received as she looked at pictures of Jesus lovingly hugging little children who looked nothing like her or the children around her. She was not sure if Jesus loved her anyway. At the same time she was taught that Jesus loved all the children of the world. Her parents and grandparents reinforced that Jesus did love her. Still there were conflicting messages received that informed her worldview. These factors certainly impacted the formation of her theology.

Early in life, the author began to experience and notice differences in the way that males and females were treated and what was expected of each. It was later learned that the assignment of rules and roles of behavior for females were governed by patriarchal attitudes. These beliefs were entrenched in society and biblically supported. The rules and roles for males and females are part of our development task to be accomplished at various stages of our psychosocial development.<sup>4</sup>

We all go through these stages as a natural part of growing up. Experiences and circumstances play a role in how one successfully navigates through these stages. It is necessary especially for females to learn the rules as early as possible. Most females learn early in life that breaking the rules for role expectations in a patriarchal society is not met

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<sup>4</sup> Erik Erickson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1998).

with forgiveness. Just ask the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-5) or the woman at the well (John 4:4-30). No decent man will want her, as she is deemed unworthy.

When the author broke the rules as a child, the negative feedback had a direct effect on her self-esteem. The difficulty in following the rules is a source of frustration and learned helplessness. This frustration also brings with it an attitude of hopelessness for the future. Often women feel isolated and alone in their efforts to move beyond their situation. When a woman has no one who believes in her or can give her an encouraging word she may never be able to move forward in her life. If she turns to the church, she will likely receive the same response that she receives from the rest of the world. She continues to beat herself up as she tries to conform herself to being the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31:10.

Over the years the word patriarchal, which literally translates in the Old Testament as “father rule,” would become a part of this author’s daily reality.<sup>5</sup> The author did not want to break any rules. She was expected to hang out with her mother at home. Under her mother’s instruction she learned to wash, iron, cook and clean house. Her brothers were allowed to skip most of these household duties. These look like innocent activities but are training and grooming rituals and are the beginnings of indoctrination to societal expectations. As she matured, these activities became more defined, as there were also expected occupations and roles for adult males and females.

For women in the Bible, “[a] woman began life under the rule of her father. At the time of her marriage, a woman passed from the authority of her father to that of her

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<sup>5</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 6.

husband.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly women are always in a dependent or subordinate position.<sup>7</sup> A woman needed the protection of a man to survive in that day and time. The lives of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi are perfect examples; their fate was written in stone as they were widowed and had no males to protect them. By working together they were able to realize a new reality for their lives. They escaped the expected fate of widows.

There are many passages in scripture that demonstrate that women are property and subjected to male authority. Examples of these scriptures include Jephthah’s daughter (Judg. 11:29-40) and Lot’s daughters (Gen. 19:4-8).<sup>8</sup> Jephthah’s daughter lost her life because of her father’s promise to God for his victory in war. Lot offered his two young daughters to be sacrificed to protect his male visitors whom he claimed were under his protection. Hospitality was extended (historically) to protecting your guest. Lot obviously valued this expectation for his male guests over protecting his daughters. Unfortunately, these scriptures are not reinterpreted for women in ways that empower and give them hope.

Women are often blamed and shamed into thinking they have done something to solicit the abuse and mistreatment that they receive. Abuse comes in many forms. This includes rejection and ridicule, especially when any one of the patriarchal rules of assigned roles of women is broken. Abuse also comes in emotional and physical ways. Sometimes women are seen as sex objects or their bodies as punching bags. This kind of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 7.

shame is unhealthy and only exacerbates the abuse experienced by women: “Unhealthy shame is Chronic”<sup>9</sup> and “[u]nhealthy shame spills over everything we are.”<sup>10</sup> Many women spend their lives trying hard to please others and accepting their assigned places or roles in life. Gender roles and expectations add to complex patterns that continue to aggravate the abuse that is received.

Many women continue to survive “in their own way.” This comes in an effort to garner some sense of wholeness and control over their lives. Even when their lives become damaged, they are able to pick up the pieces and move on. In their will to survive, through supportive relationships and resources, they are able to gain inner strength and courage they need for their own survival. Women’s experiences become the lenses through which those who are leaders view their role and function. They are the foundational groundwork from which our values rise and take shape, the place where our principles are tested and tried.

It is necessary for those in church leadership to continuously question the patriarchal and sexist attitudes and practices. The author feels that the church needs to be a place where acceptance and wholeness is found. According to Edward Wimberly, “care and nurture is the result of faithfulness according to God’s vision.”<sup>11</sup> As more females move into church leadership positions, they can become advocates for change. Leaders need to sometimes be reminded “theology is a continuing process of experience and

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don’t Deserve* (San Francisco, CA: Zondervan Publishing, 1993), 41.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 27.

reflection upon experience.”<sup>12</sup> Leaders must hold themselves accountable! You cannot be part of the solution if you are part of the problem.

Delores Carpenter was one of the first female ministers this author ever heard encouraging women in the ministry and speaking of the political issues of this ministry. She endorsed the need for women to not feel compelled to act like male pastors in the pulpit. This woman, who was also a mother, teacher and pastor, is an admired role model. Females, especially young girls, need to see women in leadership positions in the church to promote self-esteem and pride.

A woman's experience in how she is received in the world by others is unique. Her experience begins with birth. The day she is born she is said to bring sin into the world with her. The value of having a male child is seen as a blessing in the Bible. A female brings with her predetermined problematic issues in biblical history, which renders her unclean because of menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. It is because of these factors she was not allowed in Biblical history to be in public or to attend religious activities. Nor can she touch anyone during these periods of her life. The indoctrination of understanding of this expectation begins early in the life of a female child.

According to popular belief, Eve has been credited with the fall of human nature by eating the forbidden apple. Adam partook of the fruit without coercion but shares less of the blame. In Gen. 2:16-17, it clearly states that instructions for what was or was not to be eaten or given to Adam. God had not made Eve yet, but she is blamed anyway. The

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<sup>12</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 149.



woman caught in adultery was subjected to being stoned. However, the male who was involved in the act was not even mentioned.

There have been many changes as society's beliefs over the years have become more liberal in thinking and patriarchal expectations prevail. A woman continues to have primary responsibility for home and family, even when she works outside the home. Many couples in this day and time have chosen to share the load; they are still subjected to the sexist attitudes and beliefs of others. Some voice their opinions loudly and ridicule any male who does a woman's (socially) assigned work. Women often still find themselves overextended, taking on more roles as they neglect their own needs. When things fall apart at home (housework and homework do not get done), she is blamed for that too. Even when this is not voiced, she may feel some degree of guilt.

Women take on the veil of guilt under the pressure of society as they have been indoctrinated from birth to believe they are responsible for whatever happens to them. In 2 Sam. 13:1-2, the rape of Tamar reminds us that sometimes women were seen only as sex objects without regard to respect as a person. Raped of her virginity, she is no longer suitable for marriage. She is also no longer considered "beautiful": "Tamar is a woman of sorrow and acquainted with grief. She is cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the sins of her brother, yet she herself has done no violence and there is no deceit in her mouth."<sup>13</sup> Her father had unknowingly set her up, as he did not know of his son Amnon's devious plan. A moment of male pleasure and privilege becomes a lifetime of suffering

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<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 52.

and shame for Tamar. Although her brother Absalom eventually avenged the rape of his sister, the damage to her was permanent.

Today women are still subjected to being shunned when it is learned that they have been raped, have been promiscuous, or have committed adultery. If she becomes pregnant her sin becomes too obvious to deny. She is often faced with raising the child alone. She is also left with the task and responsibility of verifying who the father is and getting him to be accountable. Over the years, some of these concerns have become less of an issue with the availability of paternity testing.

It is reassuring and important for women to know that “theology is a continuing process of experience and reflection upon experience.”<sup>14</sup> As a person grows and matures in their faith, their convictions grow stronger. The author believes that the core of her theology is that all human life is precious, sacred and of worth.

This author asserts that God created us, thereby validating the claim that humanity has inherent value. We must not devalue or violate what God has made. Only God has the right to create or take life. The violation of abuse and violence in any form is an unacceptable act of sin.

The triune God create us and loves us unconditionally. That kind of love is powerfully transforming, as it gives validity and importance to human life whether it is male or female: “Creation is not an arbitrary act, something God just decided to do on a whim.”<sup>15</sup> We must be special; furthermore, we are not a mistake or afterthought.

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<sup>14</sup> MacHaffie, *Her Story*, 149.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991), 85.

Therefore no one should have the right to violate or take away the life of anyone. Instead we must honor that life, regardless of gender, male or female.

The story of Hagar and Sarah is yet another example of how females in the Bible are used, abused and face rejection.<sup>16</sup> Their saga can be found in Genesis 21:1-21. Hagar faced mistreatment and so did Sarah. Who then is the victim here? This story becomes more twisted and complex along the way, but how it is interpreted is a theological dilemma. Hagar is a slave, so she must give in, as she has no rights. This is a story that demonstrates how women can oppress each other. Often jealousy and envy enter into the relationships between women. Instead of working together they tear each other down. In selfish deceit, problems are caused for both. This author calls this internalized sexism. Sometimes women play into the patriarchal game by spending energy running from themselves and struggling with their oppression, conforming to the oppression and competing with other women for male approval.<sup>17</sup>

This author recalls situation after situation in which similar story lines emerge. Although the idea of women's rights did not exist in the lives of Sarah and Hagar, it does today. A current day example was a situation with college roommates who both made attempts for membership in a college sorority and one of them was not selected. The young lady that was not accepted became bitter to the point of constant derogatory remarks and acts toward the one who was chosen. Jealousy can lead people to do some

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<sup>16</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 185.

very ugly and hateful things to each other. How we treat each other is informed by our theology. We repeat the words like a mantra in church about being Christian and loving others. However, we do not live it inside or outside the church.

Unfortunately many young women do not know how to encourage one another. When they do it may be for the wrong reasons. The author recalls a recent news story in which a female high school student ran a prostitution business. The teen befriended others and then found ways to entice or coerce them into working for her. Did this young lady have any religious exposure? Many young people are not in church; however, they were at one time. Their values are now formed and influenced by what they see on television or at the movies or hear from the music industry. The media often glorifies or minimizes the moral and social dilemmas of the story line. It is often the case that there is no one available to talk it out or help them identify the negative values and concerns that are conveyed.

Therefore, society must question why there are such disparities between the way male and females are treated. It is the disparities that lead this author to feel that pastoral care for women needs our full attention. Women often live in fear of being judged or punished. They feel guilty although they know they are not perfect:<sup>18</sup> “A woman hopes to experience, hear, and see, a theology of hope.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, “A New Pastoral Paradigm and Practice,” in *Women in Travail and Transition: A New Pastoral Care*, ed. Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 217.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

The media often reinforce these realities. In a 1980 episode of the television show *The Waltons*, Mary Ellen was attempting to get into school to become a doctor. Her attempts were met with strong disapproval. The dean decided not to admit her into the school. He told her that she should go home and raise her son. She was very determined and told him she would just keep coming back until he admitted her. This is an example of how societal beliefs continue to control the lives of women. Her actions were clearly not an expectation from a woman in that day. This author is sure the dean would have had no difficulty in getting support for his position. The dean's position is also an example of how position, power and male privilege is used to continually oppress women. This was not an unfamiliar scene, even in real life. Although males and females with more liberal thinking have challenged oppression of women, traces of that oppression continue even in this day.

There are two movies that the author credits with bringing out the social concerns of their day. One is *What's Love Got to Do with It?* The other movie is *The Color Purple*. Both of these movies present plenty of examples of male privilege and sexism.

In the movie *The Color Purple*, when Celie told her stepson that he should beat his wife, her response represented life as she knew and understood it. In her worldview, men were supposed to beat their wives into submission. Building of a relationship or negotiating with others were skills foreign to her. She had no point of reference to understand how she was reinforcing the same sexist attitude that had her being abused daily. Some women continue to ascribe to the belief that women must be kept in line and the husband has a right to inflict physical harm on the wife. The wife has to be beaten into submission. The Bible, according to liberating interpretations, supports and

reinforces the marginalization and oppression of women: “Genesis 3 and the second account about creation have been the basis for creating a mythical framework that legitimizes women’s inferiority and their submission to men.”<sup>20</sup> Another example of the resulting marginalization of women that leads to the abuse of women can be found in Judges 19. The unnamed woman in this passage reveals a story of “betrayal, rape, torture, murder and dismemberment.”<sup>21</sup>

In the movie *What’s Love Got to Do with It?* Tina, who was trying to get herself and her children to a place of safety, was betrayed by her mother. She betrayed her by disclosing her plans to escape to her husband. Tina’s mother was not able to understand her daughter was in an abusive relationship. Tina’s husband was so wrapped up in his own selfish needs that he was not able to recognize or acknowledge her needs. Others saw that Tina was being abused, but no one came to her aide.

The author also recalls a story, years ago, of a pastor who set his wife on fire in an act of revenge and jealousy. It was reported to him that his wife was seen in a public restaurant with a man he did not know. After the pastor set his wife on fire, his friends defended his position. The friends were more concerned with his moral rights than his act of violence. His wife had gone to the restaurant with a male relative who made a brief surprise visit. This is an extreme example of sexist attitudes and oppression of women. This author cringes each time she hears that a pastor tells an abused wife whom he is providing counsel to that she should return to her abuser because he is her husband.

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<sup>20</sup> Elsa Tamez, “Women’s Rereading of the Bible,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting The Third World*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 52.

<sup>21</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 65.

It was Julia Speller who provided a closer look at the difference encouragement can make when life beats you up. This author had encountered a health crisis in the middle of her seminary training. It was Julia Speller who gave her the courage to continue her studies by encouraging and supporting her in the midst of the health crisis. This is an example of how a person can live out their theological beliefs. This author later learned that this professor “worked her way through” many situations and issues to achieve her goals. Additionally, Speller points out that church history is a tool in transformational ministry as there are connections of race, class and gender that are shaped by culture.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most basic truths we are taught in our Christian Education is the unwavering love of God. John 3:16 tells us how much God loves us. There is nothing in this passage that addresses the double standard that says women are not full and equal in this world. In the early church, women and their children were not even counted in church membership. Today, women are included, and they generally outnumber the men. Is that same thing happening when the needs and concerns of the people are not considered? When the count is taken in the church today, women are included. The count of the bodies present in the pews, however, does not consider the presence of their soul. Those who are present hear the preached word, but does that word reach their souls? It is this author’s proposal that there are different things that need to be considered. We need to be more attentive to how we do church. According to Dick Hamm (speaking during the DOC, Ohio Regional Assembly on October 12, 2012, on Transformation and Change),

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<sup>22</sup> Chicago Theological Seminary, “Faculty Directory,” accessed April 10, 2014, <https://www.ctschicago.edu/academics/faculty-and-administration/faculty-directory#12>.

the church is not called to drift downstream. The church is called to be counter-cultural, to go upstream, against the current. In order to do that, we need to look at the culture of church. We also need to ask some hard questions that address the daily concerns of the people.

There must be some way of being intentional about how leaders address the needs of the people in the congregation. Leaders also need to evaluate and critique their own attitudes and beliefs. Their attitudes and beliefs will come across when addressing the needs of the concerns of the congregants. If the teaching and preaching that comes from the pulpit fail to reach the people, that ministry will not remain viable. The bodies in the pew have real lives, not cookie-cutter lives. The majority of those in the pews in most congregations are female. Many of those females are the main workers in the church. Females are also the ones who are holding the family together, even when there is a male present. On that reality, the needs of females need to be address.

If we as church leaders are being intentional about meeting the needs of those in the pews, then we need to address the social issues they deal with. We can begin by considering worship as pastoral care. Pastors who are not educated on the social concerns of the day often use scriptures to defend sexist and others negative attitudes by the way they interpret scripture.

Pastors can no longer afford to look the other way or ignore the fact that there are many gnawing social justice concerns. It has been established by research that depression and anxiety are among the top concerns for most Americans. New statistics on the growing instances of substance abuse issues demonstrate significant increases across the nation. In the last decade, there has been a growing concern about violence, especially



domestic violence, intimate partner abuse and other types of abuse. Some of the concerns voiced by many congregants are that they are feeling stressed, overwhelmed and overextended. Though it is difficult to swallow the bitter pill, we must acknowledge that these are the realities of many of our congregants. Individuals in the church might be contributing to their struggle.

Many congregants will never set foot in a professional counselor's office, even if they could afford counseling. This is most likely due to the lack of trust or the prevailing stigma about mental health. Some people feel more comfortable speaking to the pastor about their concerns. Pastors may sometimes underestimate the magnitude of the pastoral need. Pastors may also place too much confidence in their ability to handle the needs in-house. A working definition offered by William H. Willimon on pastoral care is that it is "characterized by an emphasis on sustaining souls through the vicissitudes of life in an often hostile world."<sup>23</sup>

Many of the issues that affect the lives of women will affect men also. The issues of violence in the home and in relationships are good examples. Substance abuse is yet another. In the instances of violence, there are victims as well as perpetrators and enablers. Each may be in the pews or even among the church leaders. Having programs or preaching about such topics as abuse, anger management and stress management is a real need. However, this does not happen often. Addressing substance abuse and misuse issues is also a real need. When we do so as leaders, we open the door for people to feel

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<sup>23</sup> William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 32.

comfortable to come to us when these issues show up in their lives. This is an example of practical theology, as it addresses the needs of the people.

This author believes that education can play a key role in addressing the pastoral and spiritual needs of women. Classes, focus groups and presentations can be designed to address some of the needs. Key leaders in the church can be trained to notice and effectively address concerns with referral sources. Workshops on such topics as domestic violence and abuse or anger management may be considered. Surveying congregants may give feedback that will reveal other concerns that leaders may need to equip themselves to address. A single mother may want to attend a Bible Study or a church event and need child care. That same single mother may be dealing with a volatile and abusive relationship. She may fear negative responses from the church and the pastor and others in regards to her situation. If the pastor has not opened the door to where he or she stands by announcing it from the pulpit, then she may not feel safe to tell her story. An important point here is that all of key leaders need to be on board with the same mindset; otherwise, the pastor's position is undermined.

Female clergy are not immune to the perils of being overextended or any of the circumstances discussed in this writing. Nor are they immune from the other social concerns and perils of the day. Female church leaders do not escape the sexist attitudes either. How they handle such concerns may impact their ministries, especially if they do not handle them well.

Delores Carpenter noted that there are “two signs of hope” on the horizons for women in the ministry.<sup>24</sup> The first was that younger male ministers in seminary were studying alongside females: “As a result, they are developing a genuine appreciation for women’s ministerial gifts.”<sup>25</sup> “Women,” she asserts, “are forming close relationships of trust and are learning how to depend on each other.”<sup>26</sup> She was a role model of a woman juggling multiple roles. This contributed to the formation of the author’s doctoral project.

The dilemma for clergy leaders is often “out there” for others to see. Female clergy have already crossed the line and challenged the prevailing attitudes around a woman’s role and responsibility. Male clergy must be conscious of how they treat their clergy female leaders, their wives and their daughters. The members of the church are watching on the sidelines and unannounced. All church leaders must take care not to reinforce the sexist attitudes and beliefs.

New issues often arise when roles are reversed and the woman is the pastor. Since most of society sees a woman’s role as domestic and caretaker for the family, females do not often get the opportunity to pursue their own dreams. In this sexist world, each time a woman begins to feel some sense of fulfillment, concerns are raised about her role or family values.<sup>27</sup> Miller-McLemore points out, “[I]t is not until others, women in

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<sup>24</sup> Delores H. Carpenter, “Walking Together In Sisterhood” in *Sister to Sister: Devotions for and from African American Women*, ed. Suzan D. Johnson Cook (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), 38.

<sup>25</sup> Carpenter, “Walking Together In Sisterhood,” 38.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1993), 34.

particular, cross this boundary between self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice that we recognize the problems.”<sup>28</sup> Women must be able to recognize this situation.

Women must, at the same time, deal with their own concerns and provide a healthy role model for the women they serve. This author believes that female leaders must take the lead in bringing concerns of all females to the table. As they are in a leadership position, they have more of an opportunity for their voices to be heard. They must hold themselves and their peers (male and female) accountable. They can be a healing presence and a voice for justice when they proactively address and challenge injustices toward women. If they have made it in terms of career or goals, they have an opportunity to reach back and help other women. If they are on the way up, they have an opportunity to lift as they climb. Women’s sorority groups are great examples for role models here. The author feels that female leaders are often more sensitive and aware of the needs because they have had similar issues or personally know someone who does. This is a good reason why clergywomen should take the lead to dispel the problems of sexism and patriarchal attitudes.

According to Henri J. M. Nouwen, “ministers cannot keep their own experiences of life hidden from those they want to help.”<sup>29</sup> He also cautions us to carefully consider how our own wounds can be a source of healing and encourages us not to use the pulpit

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York, NY: Image Doubleday, 1972), 94.

to talk about our problems, as it is not helpful.<sup>30</sup> This author feels that helping others helps with your own healing.

We can offer ourselves as ministers for healing and as agents for change. We must also remember “no minister can save anyone.”<sup>31</sup> Another opportunity that may often get overlooked in ministry is the opportunity for some deep listening that goes beyond hearing the words being spoken. In our “failures to listen are assumptions about what people need, which are just that—assumptions.”<sup>32</sup> This author calls this listening with a “pastor’s heart” not just with your ears: “Hearing the people is the way they are known, their struggles, pains, and needs are revealed in listening to them.”<sup>33</sup>

It is of concern that there is not always a strong bond between clergywomen and other women in the church. Sometimes, “there appears to be some competition between her and the laywomen.”<sup>34</sup> Miller-McLemore notes, “The entrance of paid clergywomen often upsets the ‘sexual politics’ of the church.”<sup>35</sup>

It is not always easy for women to trust each other. If you can recall in the biblical passage, Naomi did not fully believe Ruth was truly going to stay by her side at first (Ruth 1:18, NRSV). Ruth proved her loyalty by putting her own needs aside to attend to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>32</sup> Emma J. Justes, *Hearing Beyond the Words: How to Become a Listening Pastor* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., xv.

<sup>34</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 60.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

her mother-in-law. Women who were alone, in that day, were subject to abuse. Since God loves us, we must love and honor all human life. This gives inherent value, worth and honor to every human being. Life is dishonored in the form of violence, rape, abuse or mistreatment of any form. These things dishonor what God has created. This fact pointedly admits that we do not always live out our lives according to God's plans. This author sees these acts as violations that are sinful in nature.

There are two repeated themes in the continued oppression of women. The first is that God called everything and everyone into existence. The second is that all that was created was said to be good: "We are created and justified by grace."<sup>36</sup> There is no one on the face of this earth who should dare claim that kind of power. We did not call life into existence so therefore we must respect human life and not dishonor it.

In reflection on the second theme that God saw everything that was done and announced it as good, we must respect that. We disrespect the creation of God when we see differences as flaws or do not accept these differences. We are not perfect, but we are all perfect in God's eyes: "God values all."<sup>37</sup> However, in the limited insight of our society, "our worth is defined by our resume, rather than our inherent worth as children of God."<sup>38</sup>

As Christians we speak often about being a community of believers. We may speak the language, but how we live that out should not be an afterthought. This author

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<sup>36</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 87.

<sup>37</sup> Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> Edward P. Wimberly and Robert M. Franklin, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling: The Politics of Oppression and Empowerment* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 128.

believes that it is important that we remember that we continue to be a part of the community of believers outside of the church walls. We must sometimes be willing to break from tradition to help women on the margins: “Christians should be those which live by a different story, a story which insists that the sacrificial life is not a violation of freedom but its fulfillment.”<sup>39</sup> Understanding this will help us to live with integrity and compassion in the community. In the community we must model love and acceptance to others. We must also model justice in the ways that we treat other people. The value of community for this author is an important part of her theological beliefs.

In community we come to the table as we gather to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. This time of celebration may be called Communion, the Eucharist Celebration or the Lord’s Supper. It is one of the most important sacraments that is practiced among the believers. It is most often celebrated on the first Sunday of each month and at important functions in the life of the Church: “Across all cultures of and faiths, the act of eating together is a universal sign of unity and love.”<sup>40</sup> In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) it is celebrated each Sunday. The placement of the table is usually centered at the front of the sanctuary, symbolizing the significance placed on it by the denomination. The Disciples of Christ are often called people of the cup or people of the table. We are also called “The people obsessed with bread!”<sup>41</sup> There is an offering of hospitality as welcome is extended to each member of the community.

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Kinnamon, “A People Obsessed with Bread,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 28 (1993): 24.

<sup>40</sup> William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 166.

<sup>41</sup> Kinnamon, “A People Obsessed with Bread,” 7.

In Disciple of Christ tradition, all people must be caused to feel welcomed. The author feels that the identity statement of the denomination speaks volumes: “We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, as part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God welcomes us.”<sup>42</sup> In the early church people gathered around the table for Sunday worship.<sup>43</sup> In the sanctuary the table took a central place. This author feels that the act of communing together is central to the expression of her theological beliefs. When people break bread with each other, something wonderful happens. It is called community. People begin to connect, communicate and work together. An important part of being in community with each other is that we begin to care for and about each other. As long as there is one person who does not feel accepted and welcomed (at the table) our work is not done.

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<sup>42</sup> Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, “Our Identity.”

<sup>43</sup> Kinnamon, “A People Obsessed with Bread,” 167.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The task of this theoretical paper is to engage in scholarly dialogue with those who have researched the subject of improving the response of leaders of the church in addressing the pastoral care needs of women who have experienced abuse and violence. Positive and negative arguments will be engaged utilizing other disciplines that may include psychology, psychiatry, sociology and health care to support her argument. Since this author believes that women are often left feeling helpless, hopeless, devalued and disempowered, the author will begin by asking a question. The question—why is pastoral care of women important?

Why? This is a question that is not easily answered. There are many reasons for addressing the pastoral care needs of women. The doctoral project will focus on improving the response of church leadership in effectively ministering to and addressing the needs of women in the church who have experienced abuse and violence. The basic foundation for this project is a pastoral care model for victimized and abused women. This research topic is being explored because women must contend with the misogyny of patriarchal and sexist attitudes and practices even in the church. These attitudes and practices have grown from society and the Christian beliefs informed by the interpretation and misinterpretation of the Bible. These attitudes, therefore, have

historical roots that continue to inform thought processes and practical treatment of women. Abuse and issues of violence have been selected because of the deeper issues of disparities that often surface and impact many areas within the lives of women after they have encountered abuse. This treatment compromises, inhibits and affects women in multiple ways including mentally, physically and spiritually.

The disparities of treatment show up in health and mental health. Females who have been abused are often traumatized. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a seriously debilitating mental health issue that can negatively affect and forever change and inform a person's life. Also, low self-esteem may be a direct result of the abuse one may have encountered. Women eventually feel that they do not deserve better treatment and these feelings affect the quality of her life. Women with low self-esteem often demonstrate and engage in high-risk behaviors such as drug abuse or sexual promiscuity leading to unwanted pregnancy, obesity or venereal diseases. Additionally, mental health concerns may become a factor such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression or anxiety. Further, depending on the financial status, a woman's physical health can be affected, as she may not have health insurance or dental insurance, meaning her health care will become limited to what is offered in free or low cost facilities. This may lead to poor eating habits, obesity, heart problems, dental issues, challenges in pregnancy or poor control if she has diabetes. Spiritually she may feel rejected, unlovable or less than whole. Feeling helpless and hopeless may be a constant reality.

The mistreatment of any human being is a social justice issue, which often leads to oppressive policies and practices. The justice issue in this instance causes women to be oppressed and keeps them on the margins of society, leaving them to be seen as weak and

vulnerable, which could be deemed as the beginning of the cycle of abuse and violence. Although one can see in history how the plight of women's lives in regard to patriarchal attitudes and treatment has improved, women are still not treated equally. As church leaders, we must not be content with status quo and get too comfortable, as the work is not done. Attending to women's issues in the area of pastoral care will eventually mean better treatment of women; in broader strokes, it will also mean a healthier treatment of women in society, the church and the home.

*Women Out of Order: Risking Change and Creating Care in a Multicultural World*, is a collection of writings that specifically address the pastoral care and counseling issues of women from a variety of perspectives. The articles in the book cross many areas including diverse cultural, economic, religious and generational lines. The book was edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton. Stevenson-Moessner first saw the need when she, out of frustration, noticed the lack of resources available on the topic as she prepared to teach classes on pastoral care.<sup>1</sup> As Stevenson-Moessner prepared to write the preface to her book she spoke candidly about how a situation going on in Afghanistan informed her and the other contributors of the book: Poisonous gas was being used to keep young girls from attending school.<sup>2</sup>

In May 2014, there was a headline story featured in *Time* of several hundred girls who were kidnapped in Nigeria. Their captors had threatened to sell them as brides to

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton, eds., *Women Out of Order: Risking Change and Creating Care in a Multicultural World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), x.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

neighboring Chad.<sup>3</sup> It had been heart wrenching to learn of the plight of these girls and their families. It was very difficult to hear that there was no way of forcing the release of these young girls. This is a modern day form of human trafficking. It is also a clear example of subjugation of women. Domination, control and violence continue to be the reality of females regardless of age or location. This situation demonstrates the vulnerability of females to being subjected to male power and control. This situation speaks clearly to the issues of oppression. The church is called to speak out on all issues of oppression. However, women, according to common interpretation of scripture, are supposed to be subjugated to male authority. Human trafficking and modern day enslavement are examples, and this is a reality that informs the need and thus validates the need for this doctoral project.

Pamela Cooper-White argues that the roles of women are complicated because women are folding together “multiple roles and relationships, but also [of] multiple internal states of emotion and identity.”<sup>4</sup> Cooper-White states that the metaphor of a “quilt offers a rich image of conceptualizing women’s psychology and women’s pastoral needs in the context of our postmodern, multicultural world today.”<sup>5</sup> “Our very selves might be understood as quilts, in which our thoughts, feeling memories, deeds, and

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<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Alter, “Nigerian President: Missing School Girls Likely Still in the Country. *Time*, May 9, 2014, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://time.com/94481/nigerian-president-missing-schoolgirls/>.

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, “Complicated Woman: Multiplicity and Rationality across Gender and Culture,” in *Women Out of Order: Risking Change and Creating Care in a Multicultural World*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

desires are woven throughout our lives into an ever more complicated and colorful pattern of consciousness and identity.”<sup>6</sup>

Many women are often socialized into expected roles and identity early in life. Little girls play house. They are also given positive feedback when they imitate the care and nurture activities of their mother. Women and girls are often criticized whenever “they break the rules.” Role identification is one of the stages of psychosocial development as expressed and developed by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. As children grow they go through stages of development as they learn about themselves in relationship to the world around them. According to Erikson, adolescents explore their role identity by asking questions about themselves: “Identity is more of a process than an end product.”<sup>7</sup>

Women often face complex issues in life. A popular belief is that women are emotionally weak in comparison to males.

The mischaracterization of women's and girls' identities as weak and conflicted has many potential negative consequences. As psychologist Jean Twenge concludes, the widespread belief that girls and women have low self-esteem and flawed self-concepts can set up negative expectations and self-fulfilling prophecies. When things go wrong—they aren't doing well at school or work, their relationships are going sour, or they are distressed and don't know why—they may conclude that it's because there is something wrong with their self-concept and personality rather than that there is something wrong in their environment. In addition, the perception that women have weak identities and low

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<sup>6</sup> Cooper-White, “Complicated Woman,” 9.

<sup>7</sup> William E. Herman, “Values Acquisition and Moral Development: An Integration of Freudian, Eriksonian, Kohlbergian and Gilliganian Viewpoints,” Education Resources Information Center, July 24, 2005, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://eric.ed.gov/?q=Erik+Erikson+and+identity+formation&ft=on&id=ED490607>, 13.

self-esteem also can discourage the public from believing that women are fit for positions of leadership and power.<sup>8</sup>

This is how women are socialized. Men are socialized early in life to hide their feelings. Women on the other hand are socialized to show their emotions. If a male shows emotion, he is seen as weak. This affects their egos, which affects their manhood. Men are socialized to be in control and have power. Women, on the other hand, are socialized to not have power or control over their lives. They are socialized to be submissive.

The result of how we are socialized impacts the fragile bond of the male to female relationship. This is one of the reasons that male/female relationships are complex. The following story is a good example:

A woman is in a room where there is no door or windows. She panics and knocks at the wall frantically. After a couple of days, realizing there is no use in doing this any longer she gives up all hope and despairs. Surrounded by the four walls, her life loses meaning, and her spirit dies within her.<sup>9</sup>

The woman has experienced the hopelessness of being a victim of domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence “feel that there is nowhere to run from the living hell home has become. They are trapped in their own homes.”<sup>10</sup>

“The sense of helplessness and hopelessness leaves deep wounds and scars that are sometimes invisible to the naked eye. This experience is a slow death of the spirit that

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Nolen-Hoeksema. “The Truth About Women and Self-Esteem: Women and Girls Do Not Have Low Self-Esteem,” *Psychology Today*, January 21, 2010, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-power-women/201001/the-truth-about-women-and-self-esteem>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

is known as han.”<sup>11</sup> “Sadness, resignation, hopelessness and despair are expressions of han in the context of how an abused women feels.”<sup>12</sup> “The essence of human existence is hope. Hope is the window of the soul. That is, when we look out and look forward, we can exist.”<sup>13</sup>

Despair, according to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, “is to no longer have hope that a situation will improve or change.”<sup>14</sup> Despair is a normal response when a relationship is laced with violence. The relationship can also be psychologically damaging. The emotional scars do not just go away.

God has not promised us a life without trials or tribulations, “but God does not want our troubles to defeat us, but transform us, so that we might help others with our stories being delivered.”<sup>15</sup> Sexual assault and violence are painful issues to tackle. It is even more devastating when there is no support system in place. Victims often feel confused, angry and frustrated. How could this have happened and why? Sometimes the incident is so painful that the incident, in self-protective denial, becomes a distant memory. Many women would rather die with this secret than face the embarrassment, shame and judgment. This is true especially if she is already haunted by stories she has

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<sup>11</sup> Park, *From Hurt to Healing*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Sung Park. *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “despair,” accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/despair>.

<sup>15</sup> Linda H. Hollies, *Sister Save Yourself! Direct Talk About Domestic Violence* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 5.

heard of women who were subjected to further abuse from the church. Often people are misinformed about sexual abuse and domestic violence, leading them to myths and misunderstandings. This leads to attitudes that judge, belittle, ridicule and withholding of support to victims. “The myths about rape have an impact on the victims.”<sup>16</sup> “Disgrace and shame is a dynamic psychological force that can paralyze us developmentally, render us socially dysfunctional, and bring forth spiritual enfeeblement.”<sup>17</sup>

Victims of sexual assault are twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs and are thirteen times more likely to abuse alcohol. In the United States of America, one in six women are the victims of attempted rape in her lifetime.<sup>18</sup> Every two minutes someone is sexually assaulted.<sup>19</sup> With statistics like these and the fact that many women line the church pews each Sunday, how can we not see the need to address the pastoral care needs of women? This author feels that our thinking continues to be informed and clouded by outdated patriarchal attitudes. This author also feels that most male pastors and other church leaders are not prepared or equipped to provide for the pastoral care needs of women. The author contends that female pastors and church leaders are aware of the problem but not equipped either. All pastors and church leaders need support to become prepared.

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<sup>16</sup> Stinson-Wesley, “Daughters of Tamar,” 229.

<sup>17</sup> Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 83.

<sup>18</sup> Dosomething.org, “11 Facts about Sexual Assault,” accessed May 2, 2014, <https://www.dosomething.org/tipsandtools/11-facts-about-sexual-assault#>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



The statistics of domestic violence are devastating. It is a known and accepted fact that alcohol and or drugs may be a factor: “In the United States domestic violence is an epidemic social problem.”<sup>20</sup> This author agrees that it is a social justice issue. This author sees it as a moral and spiritual issue, as well. “Lest we forget domestic violence is always about power and control! It is not about God. It is not of God.”<sup>21</sup>

According to statistics documented by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, one in every four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. It is also one of the most chronically underreported crimes. Eight-five percent of the domestic violence incidents are against women. The cost of intimate partner violence exceeds \$5.8 billion each year, \$4.1 billion of which is directly for medical and mental health services.<sup>22</sup> These are facts hard to ignore.

There are psychological dimensions of battering: “The traditional theory about battering had been that that women participated in their own victimization—that somehow they ‘asked for it.’”<sup>23</sup> Women do participate, but they unknowingly buy into it because they do not know any other way to respond. Rita-Lou Clarke stresses,

Repeated battering acts like electric shocks to diminish the woman’s motivation to respond. She becomes passive. Her perception is changed. She believes that nothing she can do will help. She generalizes her helplessness in her relationship.

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<sup>20</sup> Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Hollies, *Sister Save Yourself!*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “Domestic Violence Fact Sheet.”

<sup>23</sup> Rita-Lou Clarke, *Pastoral Care of Battered Women* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 36.

“No matter what I do, I have no influence.” Ultimately, her sense of emotional well being is affected, and she is more prone to anxiety and depression.<sup>24</sup>

There are women in our congregations whose need for pastoral care is evident.

We would rather look past the visible physical evidence of bruises and tears. We turn our ears from the whispers and cries for help. It is sad that as leaders we sometimes fail to hear or listen to their stories. We ignore the whispers and rumors. These women are not nameless, though they are still on the margins of society. They are our mothers, our sisters, our friends, our church members and our neighbors. We do not want to get involved with the messiness of domestic violence and sexual abuse. The reality and fear is that we have our own issues of abuse to deal with. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away: “What we need to remember is that we have all heard the sounds of the violent wind.”<sup>25</sup> We have learned to ignore those winds. Carolyn Stahl Bohler argues, “To be female-friendly in our caring requires a deep awareness of how it is to be a woman in our current culture.”<sup>26</sup>

The development of skills church leaders need to effectively address the needs of women must be intentional and persistent. The author is concerned that, too often, when progress is made on any social justice issue, some people tend to relax and revel in the successes made yesterday. When they do, it is later realized that the problem is not eradicated at all but has become worse. When one stops pulling weeds, after a good rain

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>25</sup> Linda H. Hollies, *Beloved You Can Win! Strategies for Walking Your Talk* (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), xx.

<sup>26</sup> Carolyn Stahl Bohler, “Female-Friendly Pastoral Care” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 27.

the weeds grow back stronger and multiply. A wise gardener knows that the roots of the weed are deep. They must kill or remove the root in order to eliminate the problem. Physicians, when treating their patients, ask questions about the symptoms the patient is experiencing. If they just treat the symptoms, the patient may never get well. In life, when an issue arises we must look for the source or root of the problem to effectively address it.

Many feminist and liberation theologians have seen the Bible as the root of patriarchal and sexist attitudes that led to the systemic, systematic abuse and mistreatment of women. The root of the problem lies in how we interpret the Bible. According to Susan B. Thistlethwaite, the “the Bible is part of the fabric of the oppression of battered women.”<sup>27</sup> However, it is the interpretation of the Bible that is the thread that binds the fabric. Historically, sermons have been preached that portray women in a negative light and images.

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and many other theologians have recognized the second chapter of Genesis as problematic. Genesis 2:16 clearly states that God gave instruction to man not to eat of the fruit from the tree. Man was formed first and given instruction. God made woman made last and she was formed from the rib of man.

It was not until the third chapter of Genesis that woman questioned if God really said that she must not eat of the fruit. In Gen. 3:11, God began to question both man and woman. In the thirteenth verse God asked the woman, “What is this you have done?” We

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<sup>27</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), 97.

must note here that this was God's response after man said in verse twelve, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." God's question appears to place the blame solely on woman, even though God punishes both of them and the serpent. This author questions the equality of the punishment, as God never acknowledges that the woman should have been told what was expected of her. Man never ever acknowledges his failing to do so. These actions establish and confirm how the Bible can be utilized to reinforce the patriarchal attitudes that continue to inform and validate the abuse of women today.

Thistlethwaite lifts Luke 9:1-5 as an example of how scripture can be reworked to bring out liberating themes for abused women.<sup>28</sup> Some passages are particularly difficult for a woman, such as Ephesians 5:21-23, as a woman attempts to regain self-respect and control of her life.<sup>29</sup> Bible studies for women can become a vehicle in which "women can learn that the scriptures are much more on their side than they dared hope."<sup>30</sup> Linda Hollies declares,

We need to cry over the plight of women everywhere! We need to cry, but we need to continue our labors in spite of our tears. For the perseverance while crying is mandated. A tough spirit and a 'can do' attitude is essential. We can cry and push past set limitations. A new perspective on tears is required. Cry and mow down the best arguments others will use to persuade you to cease and desist. For an "eye on the prize," mindset is what God is demanding from each one of us.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes," 103.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>30</sup> Hollies, *Beloved You Can Win!*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 97.

The story of Ruth and Naomi was researched, and their story not only provides an example of how working together as a team assured their survival, but it also provides insight for the value of teamwork in ministry. There must be some value in team efforts, as Jesus sent his disciples out two by two: “The road to our destiny is filled with too many traps, detours and pitfalls for us to try and make it on our own. We all need others who are willing to assist us in meeting the team objectives and goals.”<sup>32</sup>

Women who have been abused need others to stand with them and sometimes for them: “Good things happen when God’s people come together. When you can’t see the sunshine, somebody in the community will testify, ‘I know God will make a way somehow.’ When you can’t lift your voice and sing, somebody will break out with ‘Jesus is the center of my joy.’”<sup>33</sup> Our voices are stronger and we are more effective when we work together for the common good. The suffering of women should be a concern for every spiritual leader. It would not be faithful to one’s calling or Christian belief to allow or sanction the oppression of another human being.

The contributions of women are undeniable within society. One should not deny the leadership skills of women when there is concrete evidence of their value. Women have founded hospitals, charitable organizations, schools and religious institutions in many of the mainline denominations. Where would the church be without the efforts of women?

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<sup>32</sup> Linda H. Hollies, *On Their Way to Wonderful: A Journey with Ruth and Naomi* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Hollies, *Beloved You Can Win!*, xx.

It is the women who are the backbone of the church. Women represent more than the majority of the members of many congregations. It is their efforts that keep the church doors open, as they often pay the mortgage with their church dinners, baked goods and egg and butter money.

In spite of their contributions, women are often abused in the church. Women are told what to wear, where to sit and even banned from going into the pulpit. Women are not allowed to ask questions or give comments. Women in some congregations cannot hold certain titles. There are some congregations who refuse to seriously consider women for pastoral positions. Women are kept busy cooking, cleaning, decorating and hosting.

The author's experience as a psychotherapist has helped her to understand that women who have been abused often exhibit low self-esteem and self-image and often are insecure. Abused women are more likely to develop more serious mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some women develop even more serious mental disorders, such as schizophrenia. They may also self-medicate with drugs or alcohol to deal with their trauma.

There are many things that can be done within the church to address the needs of women. One of the things that pastors can do is to open the doors for healing from the pulpit. One interim pastor developed a sermon series in response to sexual misconduct toward women and girls from the previous pastor and the misuse of power and privilege by another. The sermon series consisted of six sermons, which addressed issues of anger, justice, thriving, forgiveness, God's grace and helping yourself through helping others.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> David R. Gerber, "The Transformative Power of Preaching to the Wounded Parish in the Printed Media" (DMin thesis, United Theological Seminary, 2006), 187-189.

David R. Gerber insists,

The Sunday morning worship service is the best opportunity the pastors and other church leaders have to communicate to the parish. One could say there is the expectation for the pastor to deliver some word from God that addresses their current circumstances and assists them in their daily walk. Although there are other opportunities to communicate with the parish, none compare in total numbers reached and best opportunity for impact to the Sunday sermon.<sup>35</sup>

This makes the sermon one of the best opportunities for pastoral care.

Another thing church leaders can do is to become good listeners when female parishioners attempt to share their personal stories. Emma Justes offers thoughtful and deeply compassionate reasons for sharpening our listening skills to provide meaningful pastoral care: “In every area of ministry careful listening is a key to effective ministry.”<sup>36</sup> Justes invites us to “actively” work at developing our listening skills. She provides focus questions and exercises to help hone the skills needed in pastoral care: “Secret keepers realize that not everyone *does* listen.”<sup>37</sup> She notes, “The greatest gift we can bring to the listening process is ourselves. And the most important thing to do in order to listen well is to keep ourselves out of the way.”<sup>38</sup>

People have a need to be heard: “All of us need to recognize ways in which we convey that we are closed to hearing what someone needs to tell. Listening is not easy,

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<sup>35</sup> Gerber, “The Transformative Power,” 186.

<sup>36</sup> Justes, *Hearing Beyond the Words*, xv.

<sup>37</sup> Emma J. Justes, *Please Don't Tell: What to Do with the Secrets People Share* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>38</sup> Justes, *Hearing Beyond the Words*, 21.

even though we often presume that we listen and hear one another.”<sup>39</sup> “[W]e discover that with their telling come the strong feelings of the speaker—feelings of shame, anger, grief, pain, and low self-esteem. These are difficult emotions for us to handle.”<sup>40</sup> “After hearing secrets we also have to find ways that let the speaker know we have heard the very worst of their confessions.”<sup>41</sup> “Kept secrets create divided lives and preclude wholeness. Pain and memories are shut away mean that the woman’s life is split rather than whole.”<sup>42</sup> “Divided lives are often diminished lives. The gifts of women are not put to full use because of the attention that must go to maintain the denial, keeping the secret and sustaining the façade.”<sup>43</sup> “Spiritual life lived in a cloak of secrecy is stunted and crushed rather than full and rich.”<sup>44</sup> If church leaders are to be effective then sharpening their listening skills needs to be a priority. These factors provide us with some of the answers for why pastoral care of women is an important need for the church to address.

The ministerial staff needs to be aware that the “incidence of sexual assault and rape is quite common. Statistically speaking, pastors and counselors can assume that either we ourselves, or someone we know has been victimized by sexual assault or rape.”<sup>45</sup> This is a very sensitive subject and spiritual leaders should definitely be prepared

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<sup>39</sup> Justes, *Please Don’t Tell*, 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>41</sup> Justes, *Please Don’t Tell*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Emma J. Justes, “Pastoral Care and Older Women’s Secrets,” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 244.

<sup>43</sup> Justes, “Pastoral Care,” 244.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Stinson-Wesley, “Daughters of Tamar,” 227.



to address. They must also have a clear understanding of what they can handle as a result of being trained. It is helpful here to have referral systems in place: “Providing pastoral care for those who have survived any type of violence is an exhausting and time-consuming task and should be done only by those who are knowledgeable about the topic and willing to become involved with the survivor.”<sup>46</sup> In order to meet the needs of women, pastoral care must be available for females of all ages. Unfortunately, many pastors are of the belief that there are no women being abused in their congregation: “We pastors need to face the fact that our congregations are not made up of perpetually happy go lucky parishioners who live lives wrapped in a nice and neat package, free from conflict.”<sup>47</sup>

There are some basic things that every pastor should keep in mind when addressing and providing pastoral care to women. One of the main things is to take seriously a woman who says she has been abused. Safety is an even bigger issue. Addressing issues of safety should take priority, especially if there is physical violence going on. Information about safety planning (such as who to contact and what to do if they feel unsafe) should be readily available within the church. Many congregations and public institutions post information in restrooms and public areas. Get to know the safe houses and the facility staff in the neighborhood. Domestic violence and sexual assault

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<sup>46</sup> Stinson-Wesley, “Daughters of Tamar,” 223.

<sup>47</sup> Al Miles, *Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 150.

are serious matters. The magnitude of the trauma of these types of assault provides evidence for reason to move these situations to the top of the list for pastoral care needs.

Forgiveness is often considered to be a “staple or pillar” of what is considered a faithful response to previous wrongs. Forgiveness is expected of the Christian community. However, this is a very sensitive issue when dealing with domestic violence victims. Pushing forgiveness can do more harm than good to someone who has been so deeply wounded by abuse: “Do not pressure a survivor into forgiving, survivors must be given time to work on the process of forgiveness without any pressure from others.”<sup>48</sup> We must remember it is their decision and their choice. One of the things that makes it so difficult is that we are taught that is a virtuous act, and it leaves the survivor feeling guilty and ashamed when they cannot.<sup>49</sup>

Church leaders can respond by forming advocacy groups around issues of abuse. They can also connect with existing organization that rally against domestic violence. There is strength in numbers. Raising a collective voice in protest against injustices has historically proven to be effective. Working in partnership and dialoging with others may help those pastors or leaders who are not educated in this area feel more comfortable addressing this issue. It will take courage to step forward and be a leader for this cause, especially if you have been criticized for taking a stand.

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<sup>48</sup> Miles, *Domestic Violence*, 148.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 151

Educational opportunities for spiritual leaders and the church community are needed. Pastors can provide space for educational opportunities, forums and support groups, as well as provide literature on sensitive issues. Bible studies may also be helpful.

In the last ten years many mentoring programs for girls and women have been made more available. The church has shown some leadership in this area. There is room for more. There are curriculums and materials that are easily accessed resources. Mentoring and support groups for women may also be an opportunity for the church to address the abuse concerns of women.

It is clear that the voices of those who have already spoken addressing the pastoral care needs of women are not always being taken seriously. Women's issues continue to be an important concern. Many women who have been abused display symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but there is no help available. Church leaders need to learn to recognize the symptoms and make referrals to professional counselors.

There is a clear need to focus on violence and abuse, as these areas do the most damage because of the deeply wounding and long-term effect of the trauma. Pastors and other spiritual leaders should not cease until justice is done. In addition to other areas of ministry, "faith communities need to integrate domestic violence resources into premarital counseling, marital counseling, men's and women's studies."<sup>50</sup>

"The faith community," in fact, "is called to represent God and call men and women to love, compassion, gentleness and respect for themselves and each other."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ron Clark, *Setting the Captive Free: A Christian Theology for Domestic Violence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), xx.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., xxi.

These responses speak to the issue of addressing domestic violence, which this author feels are appropriate expressions of faith. “Spiritual care of women is at the heart of their pastoral care . . . [w]omen’s spiritual care cannot be forced into molds made by and for men.”<sup>52</sup> The church needs to address all the pastoral care needs of women: “To ignore this violence and humiliation is to ignore the voice of God. To pat the victims on the head and minimize their pain is to slap God in the face. To go to our homes and sleep at night, without being compelled to act, while others live in terror and fear is ignoring our duty to God and our neighbor.”<sup>53</sup> They are our neighbors, mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts, friends and colleagues. Sometimes they are our enemies! Sometimes it is us!

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, “Coming Home to Themselves: Women’s Spiritual Care,” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 258.

<sup>53</sup> Clark, *Setting the Captive Free*, xxi.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **PROJECT ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this project is to improve the response of church leaders in addressing the pastoral care needs of women who have been victimized and abused. This researcher became concerned about the victimization and abuse that women faced as she attempted to grapple with the pain and traumatization she experienced in her own life. Women outnumber men filling the pews in the church in massive numbers each Sunday. They are seeking and yearning to hear or experience something that would give them hope or be a balm to soothe their pain. They seek something that will get them through the day-to-day issues in their own lives.

The researcher contends that the victimization and abuse women experience in their lives is a social justice issue. The depth and breadth of the victimization includes many of the social justice issues that the religious community has already raised voice against for decades. We are already speaking up for the voiceless and disempowered on the margins of society.

Some of these justice concerns include:

- Advocating for the poor and disenfranchised.
- Advocating for those who are homeless and for fair housing.
- Advocating for and feeding the hungry.

- Advocating for quality healthcare.
- Providing education and training for those in need.

Domestic violence should be among these issues. Women who face domestic violence are at risk for food insecurity, homelessness, and dramatic shifts in their economic status.

Women who have been traumatized through victimization and abuse are experiencing these same injustices. Unfortunately, many of these women experience most or all these issues because of the far-reaching dynamics of domestic violence.

Statistics gathered for this research demonstrate the magnitude of the problem. An abused woman is usually not prepared to face the realities that her status brings. Her tragedy also affects her children and anyone else whom she is a caretaker for. She generally has few or limited resources. Her life becomes chaotic and unstable. An abused woman will often eventually face, or if she is put out on the street, instantly faces, economic insecurity. This may mean homelessness and the inability to feed herself. In her struggle to survive and reestablish some security in her life, she must put aside or ignore the trauma to her mind or battered and bruised body (if it is not severe and she does not need immediate medical attention).

This researcher has sadly experienced, like many other women, that church is a place for more hurt than healing. Too often she, like others, found no support and pastoral care within the church. Either no one believes her or she is ridiculed and judged for her situation. Often she and many other women have found that the morning message does not give any hope or encouragement for their situation. Far too often the messages received characterize women in negative, demeaning and/or undesirable roles. These

types of sermons are harmful, demeaning and disrespect the contributions that women make to the church. These types of sermons minimize and obscure the problems of victimization and abuse.

The foundation for this project and model for ministry is a pastoral care model of leadership. Church leaders are considered “first responders” when pastoral care is needed in the wake of crises and concerns. This researcher feels that the need to address the victimization and abuse of women has become a 911 call, and church leaders need to be on the alert as “first responders.” Often women turn to the church in the wake of crisis, and the leaders of the church need to be able to provide a faithful response.

Women continue to suffer and are therefore unable to fully hear and receive the gospel message of love and acceptance. This is a social justice issue, which leads to the oppression of women and keeps them on the margins of society. Therefore, the hypothesis of this research project is to determine if attending to women’s issues through pastoral care will eventually mean better treatment of women. The researcher’s goals are to raise awareness of the concern, sensitize church leaders to the needs of victimized and abused women and raise awareness of it as a social justice issue. Finally, this researcher would like to move the church leaders to action as first responders.

The researcher is also advocating for sustained and responsible action. There is a need to partner and resource with existing community, state and national structures and agencies. These entities include hospitals, shelters, schools, social service agencies and professionally trained medical and mental health workers (counselors, social workers, psychologists).

*The goals for this action research project were to:*

1. Raise awareness of the concerns that women in the church face.
2. Sensitize participants to the pastoral care needs of women.
3. Advocate and raise awareness of the issue as a “Social Justice” concern.
4. Challenge the leadership of the church to actively address the issue as “First Responders” to pastoral needs of women.

When a woman is abused, the trauma not only leaves her with psychological and physical scars, but she is harmed spiritually, as well. There are many serious spiritual issues that each victim often faces as she begins to face the realities of what has happened. In their trauma they may question and distrust others. Even their faith in God may be compromised: “Survivors often have some very difficult questions such as: Why me? Was it my fault? Was God testing me? Was God punishing me? Was God strengthening me? Why did God let this happen to me? Does God still love me? Can God forgive me for this (evidence of self-blame on the part of the survivor)? Why is there suffering? Where was God?”<sup>1</sup> There are more questions than answers.

In order to begin the process of healing, someone needs to hear about a woman’s pain. Telling her story over and over is part of her journey toward recovery. Most people, especially those who have no counseling training, are not able to fully hear, validate or appreciate her story. Some may tire easily of hearing it and tend to rush moving on. They may minimize the value of the story or shame the victim into silence. The value of the telling of the story is recognized by this researcher and is part of the methodology utilized in this research project.

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<sup>1</sup> Stinson-Wesley, “Daughters of Tamar,” 231.



### **Methodology**

The methodology utilized for this project was a qualitative study. The project focuses on the quality of pastoral care that a woman may receive. It includes educating the pastor and other church leaders to be sensitive to her needs.

The project was implemented over a four-week period. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Ohio Region, was the context for this research project. Ministers and church leaders from the region were participants in the study and training. Two training events took place. The events were two-and-a-half to three hours in length. One was on a Tuesday afternoon, and the other was on a Saturday afternoon. A meal was served at the Tuesday event and a snack was served at the Saturday event. The announcement of both events was done by email and personal phone calls. Social media was used to announce the second event.

The initial invitation for the event was a personal invite to those attending the regular monthly district clergy meeting. Then it was sent out from the Ohio Regional Minister by way of email. A reminder email was sent out as well by one of the clergy, noting that the date was changed from the usual fourth Tuesday of the month. The researcher also made personal calls. The invite was also posted on Facebook.

The attendance at the event yielded double the usual attendance. One participant indicated that she traveled a lot but had arranged her schedule so that she could attend as she was interested in the subject. The increased attendance of women was unexpected, as this population tripled for the focus group.

The questionnaires were distributed to women in the congregation of the researcher. Attempts to do it by email and SurveyMonkey did not yield significant response. Participation was encouraged both personally and from the pulpit. The field experience component for this research project was put together using information gathered during the research portion of the study. The researcher developed pre and post surveys and questionnaires for women and church leaders. There was a PowerPoint presentation developed for the focus group.

### **Project Implementation**

This researcher began by casually asking questions at the researcher's home church regarding the availability of pastoral care. This was combined with looking around the building for evidence of resources or written material that would lead a woman to feel she could ask for support.

The research was expanded to include other persons and settings. This researcher found limited response from many pastors and church leaders. Most said they were available for those in need. When asked how women knew that they were available or if any had approached them for counseling, they acknowledged that few had. They only had two or three who approached them in their entire careers. In most instances, these pastors had been in ministry more than five years. The questions were asked of six males.

When inquiry was casually made of women, by asking the question about if there was a need for pastoral care, the response was an overwhelming yes. All of the women were able to give specific voice to this concern. The question was posed to six females.

All of the females encouraged this author to make this her action research project. All of them did follow up to see if the project was started and wanted to be a part of it however they could. The following questionnaire was given anonymously to women participants in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ.

*Questionnaire for Women*

**Improving the Response of Church Leaders in Addressing the  
Pastoral Care Needs of Victimized or Abused Women**

This is my action research project, which will support requirements for completion of my Doctorate of Ministry requirements for graduation. I appreciate your taking time today to be a part of this project. You will find listed resource agencies by county at the end of this paper. Thank you for supporting me in my work.

If you have further questions please contact me.

Rev. Betty M. Green  
[bgreen1@united.edu](mailto:bgreen1@united.edu)

**Domestic violence hot line 1-800-799-SAFE**

For further support please contact shelters or support programs in your county. The following provides 24 hour support. Please note that there may be other agencies in your area.

**Summit County:** Battered Woman's Shelter, Akron, 888-395-4357

**Stark County:** Alliance Area Domestic Violence Shelter, Alliance, 330-823-7223

**Stark County:** Domestic Violence Project Inc., Canton, 330-453-7233

**Wayne County:** Every Woman's House, Wooster, 800-686-1122

**Cuyahoga County:** Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center, Cleveland,  
216-391-4357

*Survey for Women*

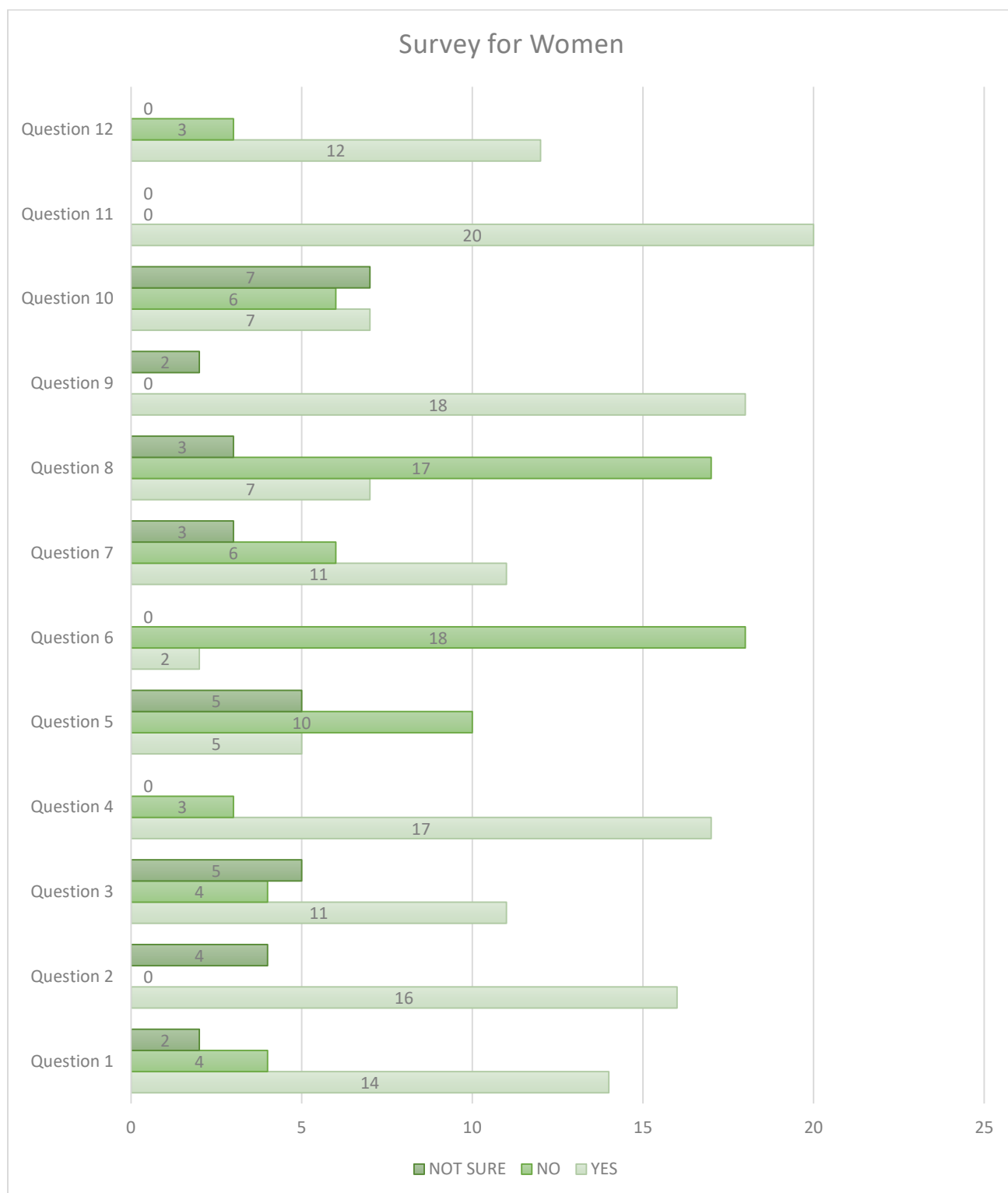
This questionnaire will take approximately 3 to 6 minutes. All questions are yes or no, or not sure. There is room at the end to give your comments. When the word “pastor” is used this also includes minister, elder, etc. This questionnaire specifically addresses issues of violence toward women (sexual and physical assault and domestic violence). Your participation answers and comments are confidential. Please do not put your name or any identifying information on this questionnaire.

1. Have you ever heard your pastor/minister mention or make comments from the pulpit about their concerns regarding pastoral care? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
2. Does your pastor provide pastoral care as a part of his or her ministry to the congregation? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
3. Do you know how your pastor feels or what their position is on abuse and or violence toward women? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
4. Do you know of any female who has experienced abuse or violence in her life (in childhood or adulthood)? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
5. Have you ever experienced abuse or violence in your life? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
6. Have you ever approached your pastor about an abuse or violence issue? **Yes or No or Not Sure**

7. Would you feel comfortable approaching your pastor about abuse or violence issues you have experienced? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
8. Does your congregation provide programs or workshops on abuse or violence toward women? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
9. Do you think it will be helpful if your church had such programs as a part of the ministry? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
10. Does your church provide resources or literature of the subject of violence or abuse? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
11. Do you think it would be helpful if your church provided resources, literature on the subject? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
12. Do you know where to find help and support outside of your church congregation if you need it? **Yes or No or Not Sure**

**Please add any additional comments or remarks you may have.**

*Results from the Women's Questionnaire*



This researcher realized that some of the women who were given the question seemed to be exhibiting signs of anxiety. Several of the women asked who had given it out. Some wanted to know if they had to do it right then or could take it home. Four of the women wanted to do it at home so they could have more privacy. This researcher was somewhat surprised about their anxiety.

This researcher had carefully crafted the questionnaire to avoid anxiety. The questionnaire requested anonymous responses. The questionnaire was kept short so that it could be filled out quickly. This researcher was told by three participants that they did not want anyone else to see their response or be questioned by others. They especially did not want their teenage daughters to see the form or what they put on it. Attempts to keep the teenage girls from viewing the form was the most surprising. This demonstrates a lack of understanding about the needs of our young people. This fact was an indication of the need for education on the topic. If something happened to one of these young ladies they would be devastated. Avoiding this sort of harmful silence is one of the goals of the research project.

The participants gave a high return on the first question.

<b>Q1:</b> Have you ever heard your pastor/minister mention or make comments from the pulpit about their concerns regarding pastoral care?	14 yes responses 70%
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There were seventeen responses indicating that one of the female participants knew of someone who had experienced abuse.

<b>Q4.</b> Do you know of any female who has experienced abuse or violence in her life (in childhood or adulthood)?	17 yes responses 85%  3 no responses 15%  0 not sure 0%
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In comparison to knowing someone who had been abused, question five had a low response in comparison to knowing someone else who has.

<b>Q5:</b> Have you ever experienced abuse or violence in your life?	5 yes responses 25%  10 no responses 50%  5 not sure responses 25%
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Question eleven yielded the highest response.

<b>Q11:</b> Do you think it would be helpful if your church provided resources, literature on the subject?	20 yes responses 100%
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Question nine had many responses as well.

<b>Q9:</b> Do you think it will be helpful if your church had such programs as a part of the ministry?	18 yes responses 90%
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The women who were anxious said that they just buried the incident in the back of their mind. They did not want to bring it up because it was so far in the past. One of the participants told me about a friend who had been hurt badly in a domestic violence



incident. Charges were filed in court as the batterer also got into a fight with the police. The person was also given drug charges because drugs were involved.

There were no responses to the request for additional comments or remarks from the participants. There was no feedback from the participants. This researcher speculates that participants hurriedly did the survey, so this is why there was no response.

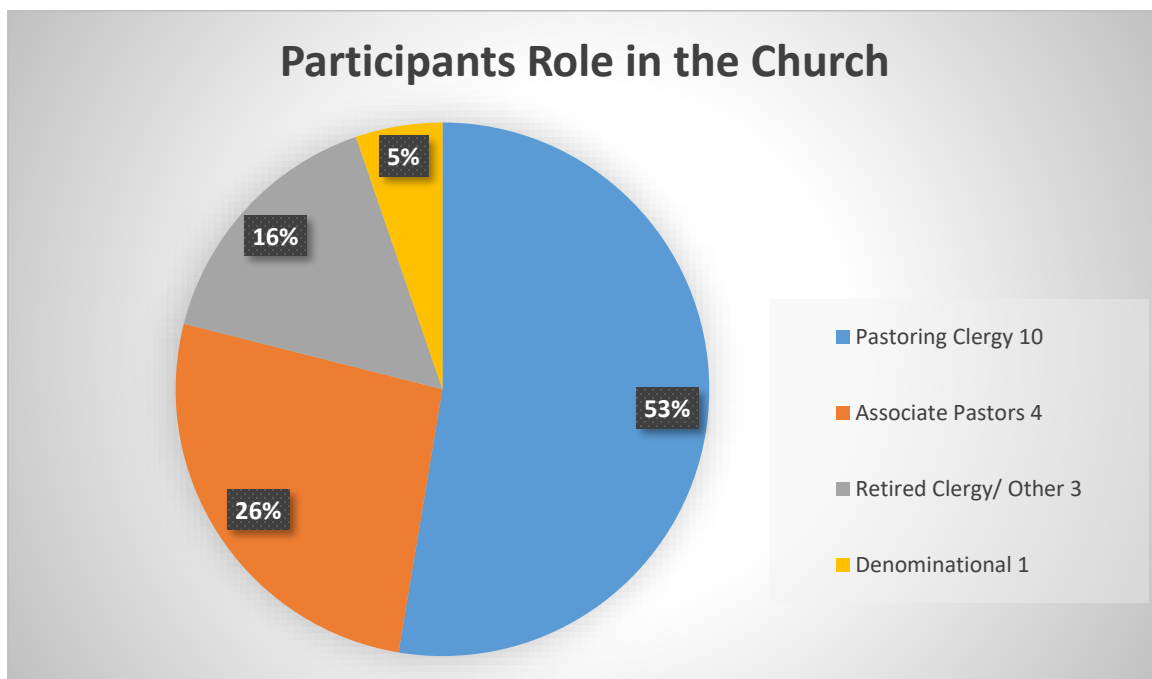
The researcher chose to get feedback from women to help her design the focus group sessions and formulate her research approach. Research that was done indicated that the needs for addressing the issue were valid. The feedback from the women was more like a litmus test for the researcher.

#### *Focus Group Session*

The researcher developed a PowerPoint presentation to facilitate the session presented to church leaders. The PowerPoint was used to facilitate an interactive session with a small group of church leaders. The attendees were colleagues of the researcher and leaders in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. The researcher's intent was to solicit input and feedback from the leaders and to present her research findings. There was also a meal served.

The context for the focus group was a gathering of church leaders in the local districts two and three. This researcher has been a part of both districts in the state of Ohio. There were two focus group sessions done with peer, contextual and professional associates. There were eighteen church leader participants in the two combined focus groups.

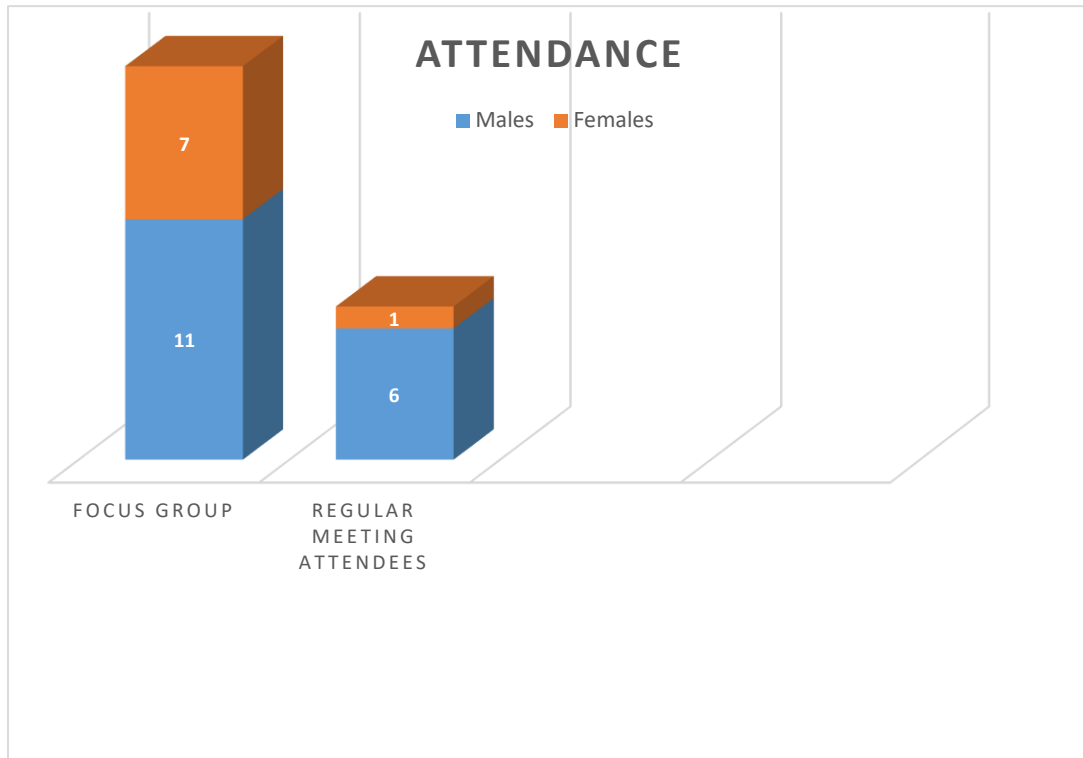
The breakdown of participants was as follows:



#### *Comments from the Participants*

- Several thought this was a much needed training for local church leaders.
- One person expressed concern that it should be repeated on another day so that others could attend.
- Many of the participants had education or training in the areas of pastoral care and domestic violence, but it was not recent.
- Two participants said that they were ready for a refresher.

As a part of the design for this research project, the researcher was concerned whether there would be many female church leaders attending the focus group. This researcher was pleased at the number of females who were in attendance on the day of the focus group. The district meeting has not been previously well attended by women.



A pre- and post-questionnaire was given to the participants. The same one was used for pre and post. The researcher used two different colors for separation between pre and post.

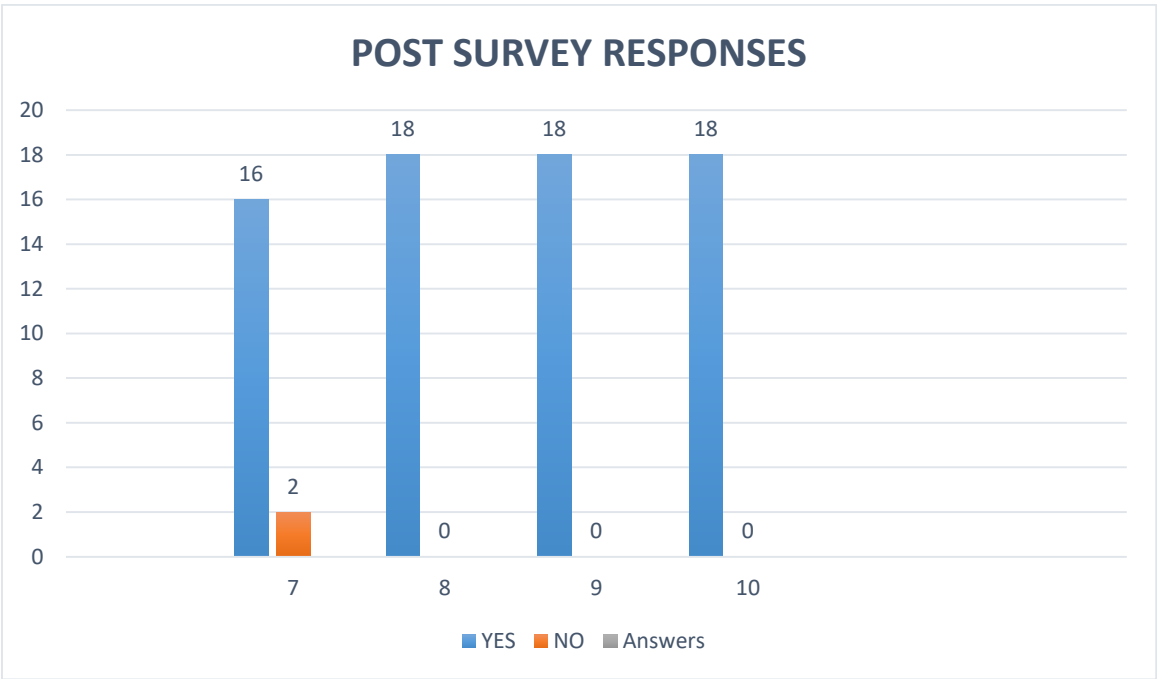
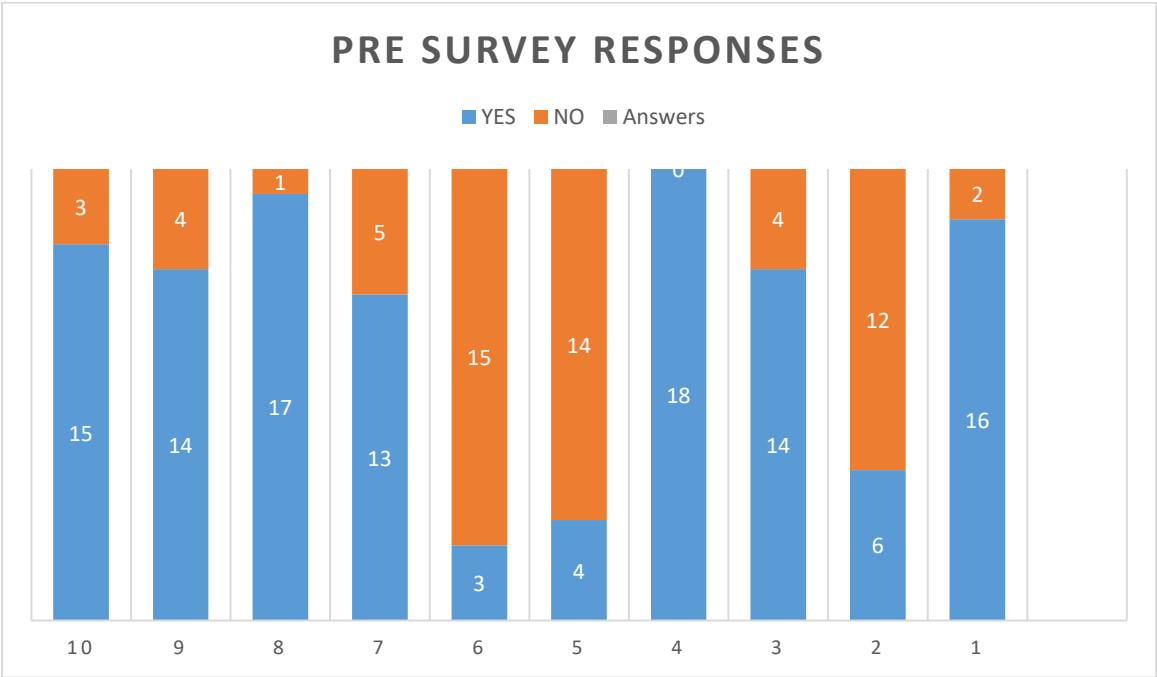
### *Church Leaders Questionnaire*

#### **Church Leaders Pre and Post Survey**

- 1. Have you ever had training or a class in pastoral care? Yes or No**
- 2. Have you ever had training on domestic violence? Yes or No**
- 3. Do you provide pastoral care or counseling as a part of your ministry?**  
**Yes or No**

4. Do you believe that there are women in you congregation who have experienced abused or violence? **Yes or No Not Sure**
5. Have you ever spoken or preached about abuse and or violence against women from the pulpit? **Yes or No.** In a church meeting? **Yes or No**
6. Do you provide resources or literature to your members about abuse and violence? **Yes or No**
7. Do you know the indicators of abuse? **Yes or No or Not Sure**
8. Do you see abuse and violence as a social justice issue? **Yes or No**
9. Do you know what resources are available in your community to support women who have experienced abuse? **Yes or No**
10. Is the following statement true or false? In the US one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime. **Yes or No**
11. What month is domestic violence month? \_\_\_\_\_
12. What percentage of all homeless women and children in the United States are fleeing domestic violence? **20% 30% 50%**

Results of the Questionnaire Responses



<b>Q1:</b> Have you ever had training or a class in pastoral care?	16 YES pre-responses	2 NO pre-responses
<b>Q2:</b> Have you ever had training on domestic violence?	6 YES pre-responses	12 NO pre-responses

- The majority of the participants were seminary trained graduates. Most seminaries provide education in Pastoral Care.
- Pastoral Care seminary training is thought to usually include violence and abuse. It is not known when the participants went to seminary, but it is believed to be more than five years ago for most.
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) requires ordained and licensed ministers to complete Continuing Education Units each year.
- Opportunities for learning are provided throughout the year through the regions and general units of the church.

<b>Q3:</b> Do you provide pastoral care or counseling as a part of your ministry?	14 YES pre-responses	4 NO pre-responses
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- Disciples of Christ seminaries provide educational training which includes pastoral care.
- The denomination calls on ministers and other leaders to respond to crisis.
- It is seen by this researcher as an important part of ministry as most pastors and lay leaders are first responders when a crisis arises.

<b>Q4:</b> Do you believe that there are women in you congregation who have experienced abused or violence?	18 YES pre-responses	0 NO pre-responses
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<b>Q5:</b> Have you ever spoken or preached about abuse and/or violence against women from the pulpit?	4 YES pre-responses	14 NO pre-responses
<b>Q6:</b> Do you provide resources or literature to your members about abuse and violence?	3 YES pre-responses	15 NO pre-responses

- The majority of the participants indicated that they believed that there were women in the congregation who had experienced abuse.
- The number of ministers or leaders who had spoken about abuse and violence against women and the lack of resources and/or literature does not meet with the awareness level. Perhaps it is not seen as a problem (cross reference with question 8).
- This data suggest that the needs of the parishioners are not being met.

Only questions 7 to 9 were utilized for the post-responses:

<b>Q7:</b> Do you know the indicators of abuse?	13 YES pre-responses	5 NO pre-responses
	16 YES post-responses	2 NO post-responses
<b>Q8:</b> Do you see abuse and violence as a social justice issue?	17 YES pre-responses	1 NO pre-responses
	18 YES post-responses	0 NO post-responses
<b>Q9:</b> Do you know what resources are available in your community to support women who have experienced abuse?	14 YES pre-responses	4 NO pre-responses
	18 YES post-responses	0 NO post-responses

- The response to questions 7 and 8 pre-responses are consistent with the fact that most participants did not have training in abuse and violence issues. An improvement was noted in post-responses.

- Most of the participants were aware of the resources available within their respective communities. Participants shared resources they were aware of in the community. A handout was provided with resources per each county.

<b>Q10:</b> Is the following statement true or false? In the US one in four women will experience domestic violence in her lifetime.	15 YES pre-responses	3 NO pre-responses
	18 YES post-responses	0 NO post-responses

Responses to questions 11 and 12:

<b>Q11:</b> What month is domestic violence month? _____	13 Left Blank pre-responses	4 October pre-responses	1 March pre-responses
	13 Left Blank post-responses	4 October post-responses	1 February post-response
<b>Q12:</b> What percentage of all homeless women and children in the United States are fleeing domestic violence? <b>20% 30% 50%</b>	1 @ 20%	1 @ 30%	16 @ 50%
	0 @ 20%	0 @ 30%	18 @ 50%

- The responses to Q11 were unchanged after the focus group session. This information was inadvertently left out of the share information. Participants asked afterwards.
- Participants were aware of this fact and answers were consistent.
- Participants shared the following information regarding how to respond to women who have experienced abuse.



<p><b>Unhealthy and hurtful responses when counseling abused women.</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Go home and be a better wife.</li> <li>2. Pray about it.</li> <li>3. Everything will be alright if you just keep praying.</li> <li>4. You must have done something to provoke this.</li> <li>5. Wait on the Lord.</li> <li>6. He must be under a lot of stress.</li> <li>7. You will be ok, it could be worse.</li> <li>8. Just love him until he comes around.</li> <li>9. If you take care of him, he will take care of you.</li> <li>10. It's your job/responsibility to meet his needs.</li> </ol>
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- The following suggestions were given by the participants regarding things that leaders could do to support women who have been abused. (See next page.)
- Participants wanted everyone to know that safety was the most important thing to do first. Church leaders need to be proactive and have plans for safety before an issue arises.
- This researcher also encouraged participants to listen well and with respect when a woman shares her abuse.
- This researcher also encouraged participants to know the limitations of their skill set. They need to make referrals for professional support in that domestic violence victims are traumatized and often showing signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome or depression.

- This researcher also encouraged participants to get to know someone at the local shelter or resource center so that they could make direct referrals when needed.

<b>Suggestions given by the Church Leaders to support abused women.</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include talk about abuse in premarital counseling sessions.</li> <li>• Respect the need for confidentiality.</li> <li>• Respect the choices of the victim.</li> <li>• Do not counsel victim with the perpetrator.</li> <li>• Know your skills and ability to handle counseling and be ready to make the referral. You are just providing the first line of support.</li> <li>• Provide space and time for support groups.</li> <li>• Provide speakers on related subjects.</li> <li>• Encourage relationship check-up or communication for married couples.</li> <li>• Become familiar with resources in your community.</li> <li>• Make connections with someone at each resource place.</li> <li>• Encourage and provide a way for women to make safety plans.</li> <li>• Provide support for safety in an emergency.</li> <li>• Be prepared on how you would be able to handle the situation if it were one of your church leaders who is the abuser (perpetrator).</li> <li>• Don't assume that members of your ministry staff share the same position as you regarding abuse toward women.</li> </ul>

This researcher briefly shared several stories of real life situations during the presentation portions of the focus group. The intent was to help the participants identify with situations that they may encounter.

There was no time to do breakout discussion and/or role play. The feedback from the focus group of church leader participants was very positive. Several voiced that it was a worthwhile and needed session. Several people wanted more information on domestic violence and human trafficking. Clergy and other church leaders are first responders whenever a parishioner encounters problems and concerns in their lives. Pastoral care provides an inroad to move beyond the Sunday morning sermon and into the lives of each parishioner. To adequately and appropriately serve the people of God we must move beyond Sunday morning.

### **Summary of Learning**

This researcher feels that she has only scratched the surface of this very important area of ministry. As this researcher began the project she considered several topics. As she wrote her synergy it began to come together. A lot of work was done on her autobiography and synergy. Eventually, her ministry focus began to surface. There were many long days, nights and frustrating moments. After a number of rewrites and discussion with mentors, peers, professionals and context associates it became clear where her passion was.

This doctoral project continued to grow even at the point of implementation. The veil of secrecy and denial became very evident within the community and in the Church.

Many people are misinformed or uneducated about abuse and victimization of women. During the research phase, the author began to be able to articulate the rationale for this project. She observed stories reported by the media on various situations of abuse toward women. She was moved from anger to tears as she heard the stories of three young ladies who were held captive and sexually abused for years by someone in their own Cleveland neighborhood.

Their families and friends had no idea of their whereabouts of the missing ladies. At least one of the families thought their family member had run away and did not bother to look for her. The public became enraged as they watched video footage of Ray Rice, an athletic superstar brutally beating his fiancée in an elevator. There was more of an outcry when the fiancée quickly married her abuser and attempted to explain and justify her new husband's action. The public was baffled by her actions. Most people do not understand the complexities of the situation. It is not uncommon for victims to try to justify and accept their mistreatment.

As people become educated about abuse and violence, they become less judgmental and more understanding of the victims' situations. As more victims find the courage to come forward and report their abuse, the number of documented cases increases. These stories are very powerful lessons for other victims and serve as a way of helping the public to understand.

This author continues to assert the need for church leaders to become "first responders." They must actively address such issues from the pulpit, through church programs and through involvement with community groups dedicated to the issue.

Adequate pastoral care for those who have been abused has become a necessary and vital ministry to support victims. This author has learned the importance of validation for the victims. She also realizes and understands the value of hearing and receiving the stories of those who have been abused. The opportunity to write her autobiography allowed her to revisit her own story.

Silencing the victim only causes deeper hurt and shames the victim. Silencing also prolongs the pain and prevents healing. Telling their stories allows victims to work through their healing. The power of story gives the victims voice and empowers them to become victors instead of victims. It frees them from being imprisoned by fear and the shame of their abuse. The telling of stories also unveils the mystery that clouds this evil, shining a light that breaks the darkness of secrecy and reclaims hope for victims. The church can then become a healing source of hope.

After the implementation of the project focus groups, several ministers reported that their approach and message changed when they preached sermons that included women. They reported that they lifted up positive characteristics of women instead of only negative ones. Many of them made plans on how they would respond and support women who reported situations of abuse. This writer was pleased to hear her husband talk about domestic violence and mistreatment of women from the pulpit.

After critical reflection, this author realizes that adding more information and giving an overview of domestic violence was necessary. Many church leaders who are not seminary trained do not have any training in this area. In order to keep skills updated, church leaders should strongly consider additional training every few years to update and

refresh their knowledge and skills. There is a need to draw upon the experience and expertise of those who have had training. This is a rapidly growing ministry, and no one has all the answers. Collaboration in this area will be beneficial to all.

This research work only focused on one area of abuse. There are many types of abuse issues that need to be addressed. These areas could include sexual assault, date rape, and human trafficking. In light of these factors, this researcher realizes that this project cannot and should never be considered a “final piece of work” because there is constant change.

In summary, the clarion call to leaders of the Church is not to continue to drift along in calm waters of status quo, but to challenge them to trouble the waters by engaging scripture in ways that bring hope and healing to women who have been victimized and abused. Women do not need another generic rendering of scripture that continues to eat away at the fibers of their souls, leaving them shamed, vulnerable and hopeless. The ability to provide healing and hope is needed in this ministry. It cannot be understated. No one should ever have to live with abuse or violence. Therefore church leaders need to take the time to examine their practices, values and beliefs. Women should not continue to suffer pain and rejection from irresponsible and thoughtless church leaders. Women’s lives matter, and the pain they suffer is real. Every life is precious and a gift from God.

### **Suggested Improvements for Future Projects**

This researcher would carry out or implement this project by developing a format that would be flexible for a one- to three-day training format. This project implementation would include time for role-playing and reflection. The format can be for either small or large groups.

In order to keep the focus of this work relevant, the author feels that research and identification of new resources will be important. Current news stories would be included in every presentation to help validate the significance of the work. This should also include updated statistics. These are some of the things that will help keep the presentation relevant and up-to-date.

It is this researcher's intention to expand this work into a training and educational ministry. The work that has already been done will provide a foundation for expansion. The format can easily be expanded to a one- to three-day format. The work itself can also be developed to provide material for a Bible study or support group.

As the author has completed this work she has been encouraged by leaders of her denomination to continue this ministry through training and speaking events. She has been asked by one of the major denominational constituency groups of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association, to develop it into a social outreach ministry. She has been invited to attend the "Hope Partnership Leadership Academy" to support her effort to develop this ministry.

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